HITE CIRCLE POCKET NOVEL

JUNGLE HARVEST

TOM GILL

Mystery Story

UBLISHED BY COLLINS

SERVICES EDITION

THIS fine dramatic novel of adventure in the coastal jungles of Central America has all those elements of suspense, excitement and romance which have made Tom Gill one of the most popular writers of outdoor fiction since Zane Grey. Swift-paced, authentic as to background, with a most engaging love interest, *Jungle Harvest* is as satisfying an adventure story as you can find.

By the Same Author

NORTH TO DANGER

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EATH RIDES THE MESA STARLIGHT PASS

RED EARTH HEARTWOOD

FIREBRAND

JUNGLE HARVEST

by

TOM GILL

COLLINS
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1853

To
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CHAPTER ONE

DANNY gave it up.

After all, it was the doctor's worry. And besides, the coast couldn't be far away, for the warm breath of the jungle floated fitfully out to him, and once he heard the boom of surf. He peered across the oily water, but the feeble light of the ship's lantern faded into foggy blackness, and for want of better occupation Danny fell to watching the launch's other occupant—Carlos O'Hearn, M.D.

Squatting amidships, the physician resembled nothing so much as a swarthy Buddha, with horn-rimmed glasses and white alpaca suit. Danny counted the rolls of flesh on the huge neck. Three chins in front, he summed up, and three spares behind. Perfect balance, fore and aft. But aloud he only said, "The fog's thicker."

The doctor's heavily lidded eyes scowled out over the black water. "*Si*. Fog at this time of year—" He shrugged.

Almost always Carlos O'Hearn's sentences ended in a shrug. He seemed content to give his thoughts their initial impetus, leaving his listeners to carry on or not, as they saw fit.

"How do you know you're keeping to the shore?" Danny asked.

"Senor, I do not." The response was prompt and cheery. "Only when I hear the surf. But for the last ten minutes I hear nothing."

"In that case we may be heading straight out to sea?"

"Or even back where we came from."

Danny crossed both feet over his suitcase. "Fat chance of seeing Rod Peters to-night."

"*Paciencia*." With his handkerchief the doctor began mopping various moist chins. "After all, it is not a sweetheart who awaits you. It is only—how do you call him?—the boss."

"He's more than just a boss. And I haven't seen him for two years."

"What, then, are a few hours?" With a pudgy hand O'Hearn waved the question into nothingness. "We Latins know that time exists only for the convenience of man. To be a slave of the clock, senor—"

The philosophic flight perished in mid-air. With a crash and a scrape the bow of the launch rose, tilted crazily to port, then hung there while luggage, gasoline cans, Danny, and the doctor slid as one into the bilge-splashed stern.

The light went out. O'Hearn mentioned the names of several saints, and felt about for his glasses. Later, as an afterthought, he called, "Senor Gayforth! Where are you?"

Pinioned by the weight of O'Hearn's more than ample rear, Danny mumbled, "Right underneath you."

There was a general rearrangement of torsos, and Gayforth asked, "What did we hit?"

"Only the Good God knows." Don Carlos struck a match and succeeded in lighting the lantern.

The launch had listed almost to water-line; bilge was seeping up below the engine, and the doctor began sounding with an oar. "Two feet of water on this side," he announced, "and no bottom at all on the other. We are on a reef. We are also likely to stay."

Together they pushed on the oar, but the launch would not budge. They moved ballast and strained again; they tried throwing over the anchor and jerking at the rope—all without effect.

The doctor began panting gently. "I detest physical exertion," he confided.

"Suppose I get out and lift?" Danny suggested.

"Later, perhaps, should the tide be rising. But just now—Dios! My cigars!" O'Hearn rescued a box floating in the bilge and, lighting a long black corona, settled back, more inscrutable and Buddha-like than ever.

Danny broke the silence. "Look. I'm a strong swimmer. Why can't I swim ashore?"

"Which way would you swim?"

"That way."

Tolerantly the doctor smiled. "In that direction you might at last reach Cuba, or perhaps the tip of Yucatan." He lifted his hand at a full right angle from Danny's. "My guess would be that shore lies over there. But it is only a guess."

The issue didn't seem worth arguing, and Danny relaxed while the doctor eyed him approvingly.

"I like the way you accept things, Senor Gayforth. In this country one neeeds always the quiet nerve." He nodded. "Yes, and you should be a strong swimmer—long legs, broad shoulders, and such a long body. Like a fish." O'Hearn smiled. "A red-headed fish."

Maliciously Danny interrupted. "If a wind comes up and starts battering this soap-box to pieces, we'd better be a couple of fishes."

"Wind and fog—they never mix. It will not blow."

"We may be closer to shore than we think. If we shot a gun—"

"Or sent a radiogram."

Danny's head jerked up. "Have you a radio?"

"No, senor. Nor a gun either."

Danny ignored the elaborate irony. "Somebody might hear us if we called."

"Somebody conceivably might." In the doctor's voice was an overtone of resignation. "Only it is fair to remind you that this is Central America, and not New York harbour. People here are scarce. But call by all means, if you find it amusing."

Watching the veil of mist drift across the lantern, Danny began to realize the keenness of his own disappointment. For six days he had held to a schedule of plane and steamship, only to hang up on a reef within an hour of his goal. And for those six days he had thought of little else than seeing Rod Peters again. The cable calling him here had been a thrilling surprise, and more thrilling still the prospect of being Peters' right-hand man. But Rod had always encouraged him. Ever since that day, ten years ago, when Rod had taken him on—a thin, awkward, high-school kid—to run errands for the Peters Construction Company. Old Rod—

Danny sat bolt upright. Above the muffled beat of

surf he caught a blurred sound. It came again—a human voice if he ever heard one—and, cupping his hands, he shouted a long hello over the water, while the doctor's smile grew positively beatific.

"Young voices are so pleasant." O'Hearn blew a ring of smoke into outer darkness.

"*Listen*!" Danny was holding up his hand. This time they both heard—a girl's voice, clear and surprisingly close, coming from somewhere straight ahead. Frantically O'Hearn scrambled to the bow and began shouting in Spanish so rapidly Danny didn't even try to follow.

At last the doctor stopped, and a faint, "*Si,*" came floating back.

"She will send a *cayuca.*" O'Hearn spread his hands in an expansive gesture. "You perceive, my friend, how all things work out. One needs but patience."

"Plus a little initiative," Danny amended.

Minutes later he heard the voices again—not one, but two girls talking in Spanish. Vainly he scanned the blackness for the outline of a canoe, then—Danny started. Two dark heads were entering the circle of light, two girls swimming slowly, hair streaming out behind them, arms rising in effortless rhythm, while a ripple of foam followed them.

Just off the port bow they stopped and began treading water; the nearest called "*Buenas noches,* Doctor O'Hearn."

"*Que tal, senorita, que tal.*" Volubly O'Hearn began explaining their predicament, while the girls listened and Danny watched. In the faltering light of the lantern he could see little more than the dusky triangles of their faces, but they were sisters—he was sure of that. The same clear, bronzy skin, the same friendly, wide-spaced eyes, and down over their shoulders hung the thick wet curtain of their hair. The older girl was in mid-twenties, the younger scarcely more than ten.

But now O'Hearn pronounced the word "Gayforth," and as the two dim faces turned, Danny braced himself for his first linguistic effort. "*Yo gusta muchissimo—*"

"Dear God!" the doctor groaned. "Can that be Spanish? Mr. Gayforth, I am presenting you to ladies

who speak English as well as you and a great deal better than I. These are the Misses Starling."

Two quiet hellos acknowledged the introduction, two pairs of long, dark eyes appraised him; then the older sister turned to O'Hearn.

"There was no *cayuca* at the dock," she said, "so we swam out. You're on the reef at Temple Island."

"Temple Island." The doctor sighed. "Five minutes more and we would have arrived. Your father will never let me forget this. But come aboard and rest."

The younger sister giggled, and the other shook her head.

"Can't. Dabs and I haven't any swimming suits. But the tide will float you off in an hour."

Danny felt the launch swerve ever so slightly. "Doctor, if you got down in the stern and jiggled, we might all push it off."

It was worth trying, and, slipping out of his shirt and shoes, Danny let himself overboard. The water was warm —much warmer than the night air—and, holding to the gunwale, he felt his way along the edge of the reef. At the bow the shadowy form of the older sister emerged.

"Can I help?"

It occurred to Danny that help from a girl without clothes or bathing suit would be strictly limited. "Stay where you are," he recommended hurriedly, "and when I say 'heave'—heave."

It took more heaves than one, and perhaps the titanic jiggling of O'Hearn's three hundred pounds helped more than all the rest, but finally the keel grated back into deep water, and Danny pulled himself aboard.

"Can't we tow you in?" he asked the two girls.

"We'll swim," the older answered. "You'll see land in a few minutes—the fog's not nearly so thick inshore."

"You're not afraid of sharks?"

For the first time the younger girl spoke. "Father says it's all damn nonsense about sharks."

"Dabs!" her sister admonished. "Damn's on the blacklist."

"It's not on Father's. Last night he—"

"Dabs!"

Dabs subsided and together they swam away. But once again, just before they passed from earshot, Danny heard Dabs's voice, "Jeepers, wasn't he beautiful? Red hair, all curly—" The voice ceased, and Danny flushed at the doctor's delighted chuckle.

The sputtering motor started, and, feeling his way foot by foot, the doctor advanced. But the fog was breaking. Like great cottony shreds it floated by them, out to sea; the pale radiance of a moon worked its way through thinning mists, and the low line of jungle took on form. Breathing relief, Don Carlos began skirting the bar.

Danny pulled on his shirt. "Who are those girls?"

"The Starling sisters, Faith and Dabs. You will see them again to-night. Their father, Anthony Starling, is the great American archaeologist—and the most remarkable man I have ever met. He belongs to the days of knights and dragons. A man of tremendous strength, mental and physical, and with enormous—how do you say?—lust for living.

"Ten years ago he came here, when Faith was thirteen and Dabs a baby. In one magnificent gesture, senor, he bundled up his books and his daughters, turned his back on civilization, and built a home here in the jungle."

"Why?"

"He told me once he did not want any children of his moulded to the pattern of the cities. He wanted to bring them up in his own way. And he has—with a result that is sometimes disconcerting. But, of course, there were other reasons. This jungle is rich with ancient cities and ruined temples to make any archaeologist happy. Here Don Antonio has lived and raised his daughters and written his books. Always he swears he will never write another, and then always he does. He carries on a continual war of words in five languages with other archaeologists all over the world. Even down here he quarrels with everybody except me—and I am too lazy to quarrel.

"Yes, he was very wise in coming here. He would not fit into any civilization. Don Antonio needs room to breathe and roar."

"But what about the daughter?"

"Faith? Ah, you are more interested in her, no?"

"Well, it's a queer life for a girl. I should think she'd go to seed."

"One does not go to seed around Don Antonio. And for brains I would uphold Faith against any woman anywhere. Equally she would be at home in a peon hut or an embassy reception. Each year or two she makes a visit to the States or to South America, while her father storms and sulks. Sometimes she brings friends back." O'Hearn smiled. "After her last trip, an army major followed her here. He wanted to marry her. Don Antonio almost developed a thrombosis."

"Was she in love with the major?"

"I could not notice it. But Faith affects men strangely. Even at my age--" O'Hearn took a thoughtful puff, and decided to abandon the thought. "Faith likes men," he added, "but they are not—they are not exactly a treat to her. We are good friends, Faith Starling and I. She helps me when the fever season strikes."

"She's a nurse?"

"She is better than that—she is an intelligent woman and immune to fever."

They were passing from the oily swell of the sea into a landlocked lagoon. The fog had shrunk to a thin silver line on the horizon. The full moon was high above them in a cloudless sky, and from the jungle came gusts of hot, humid wind, odorous with centuries of rotting vegetation, heavy with the scent of unseen marshes. Danny felt his heart beating faster—they were almost there!

"Watch out for the dock," O'Hearn cautioned.

But Danny wasn't looking at the dock. He had caught sight of a long-awaited figure.

"*Rod*!" He was on his feet, wildly waving. "Hi! Boss!"

"Danny, old fellow!" The launch scraped the dock, two sinewy arms reached down, and Danny was looking up into a well-remembered face.

CHAPTER TWO

A SLENDER man in his middle forties, Roderick Peters was dressed in the almost standard uniform of tropical field men—white soft shirt, khaki trousers, and high-top boots. His face was burned leather-brown by the same sun that had traced fine lines around the blue-gray eyes.

"It's grand to see you, old son." The voice was pleasantly low and leisurely. "It's just great." He stretched out his left hand to the doctor. "Faith told me you were coming. How goes it, Don Carlos?"

"It could be better. We—we stopped on the reef at Temple Island, but I have delivered your man."

"I knew you would. We're indebted to you."

"*Nada*. He is a good traveller. In trouble he takes things easy."

"Don't say that," Danny laughed. "Rod thinks I take everything in life too easy."

For the first time Danny saw that Peters' face was drawn—or tired—and he touched the older man's arm. "Everything on the up-and-up, Boss?"

With a quick look toward O'Hearn, Peters answered. "We may be in for trouble. Don't be surprised, whatever happens. I'll tell you later." He switched on a searchlight. "Better let me go ahead, doctor—and watch those steps."

They were steps cut from living rock, leading back into a jungle growth so thick the path itself was like a tunnel lined with leathery leaves and long red creepers. Upward they climbed, until O'Hearn's wheezing protests grew faint for lack of breath, and at last they emerged upon a broad, grassy knoll.

Rod pointed. "There's where we spend the night—the famous Starling hacienda."

Against a blue-purple sky, the limestone walls of a low, rambling house gleamed white beneath the moon. A red-tiled roof sloped back from the upper storey, half-hidden in jasmine and bougainvillea, and softly shaded lights flooded the wide verandah.

Danny took a deep breath—there was something unreal in that dramatic whiteness, something remote and mysterious as the jungle itself. Danny remembered O'Hearn's words. Here, then, was the refuge of one who had turned his back on the world, who had chosen for himself and for his children to live among the ruins of a culture long perished from the earth.

Gayforth took a step forward, then stopped, for almost at his feet he heard the warning snarl of an animal.

Peters threw on the light. Small cages flanked both sides of the walk, and still more cages led back along a narrow path. An armadillo waddled toward them, and behind a screen Gayforth saw the shining scales of a coiled snake.

"Dabs's menagerie," the doctor explained.

"The little girl who swam out to see us?"

"*Si*. Dabs. The peons find these creatures in the woods and bring them to her. And when they are sick she brings them to me. I have set the bones of a dozen dogs for the little senorita, and my fee is always the same—a kiss from her, and a cold bottle from her father's cellar."

The doctor was mopping his chins again. "Mother of God! Each time I climb these steps I risk a cardiac crisis. Not even Don Antonio's sherry is worth it. Come, let us get inside before the mosquitoes find us."

A comfortable place. On the floor of the screened porch brightly coloured rugs were scattered; deep-cushioned chairs invited rest, and on a huge chest by the wall stood decanters of whisky and sherry. Books piled the tables, and through the door Danny could see shelves crowded with hundreds more.

"Looks like a circulating library," Danny observed, but O'Hearn shook his head. "It does not circulate, *amigo*. Even I could not borrow a single volume for overnight, yet here in Anthony Starling's library are more than two thousand books—and in all languages. Many he has written himself."

Entering, they found the porch silent and deserted, but that silence was very brief. For inside the house an

unseen object crashed to fragments, and a deep bellow of rage slowly resolved itself into words.

"Great everlasting balls of fire! It was here before dinner! It didn't walk away! If Dabs has been monkeying with my desk again—" The voice dropped to a growl, then rose in a new crescendo. "I defy the Archangel Gabriel to do any work in this madhouse. *Dabs*!" The last word rolled through the room like a salvo, and all the glasses by the decanters rattled.

Lazily the doctor smiled. "Don Antonio is in good voice to-night." Rapping with his fingers he called aloud, "Senor Starling—you have guests."

A chair was pushed back, a heavy tread made the floor creak, and against the back-lighting of the inner room Gayforth saw the great hulking form of a man. Bigger than human the figure seemed, not only because of the height, but the gorilla-like hugeness of the chest, the heavy shoulders, and grizzled, wiry hair that stood upright on his head and protruded in little tufts from his ears. The head itself was heroic—enormous, beautifully modelled—and the eyes dark with intensity. An ageless face, intelligent and vigorous. The protruding underlip, the strong yellow teeth spoke of unquenchable vitality, and with his coming the door and table seemed suddenly to shrink—Anthony Starling had a way of dwarfing everything.

But now at sight of the doctor, his eyes took on a look of sardonic amusement. "So," the voice began booming, "after forty years you don't know where Temple Island is, O'Hearn?"

The doctor's shoulders rose. "It was the fog."

"Bosh! I could smell my way along this coast."

In self-defence, O'Hearn pushed Danny forward. "I bring you a new neighbour—Senor Daniel Gayforth." Tentatively he added, "You will like him—he is a very nice young man."

"The world is cluttered up with nice young men. Often wonder what becomes of them." Ignoring the outstretched hand, Starling peered into Danny's face. "Dolichocephalic. Frontal lobes fair. Possibilities—but only possibilities."

With a laugh Danny turned to Peters. "I feel just like a museum piece."

But Starling wasn't through. "What are you doing down here, young man?"

"I came to be Mr. Peter's assistant."

"Great God! Another mahogany hacker! Wasting your life." With a sharp, whistling sound he filled his lungs. "Well, it's your life, so come in, come in. There's whisky and cigars on the table."

Wondering how it felt to be the daughter of this volcano, Danny stepped inside, but as he passed his host a sausage-like finger waved suddenly in his face—Starling was off again.

"What makes you think you'll stay here any longer than the other one?" he demanded.

"What other one?"

"That nincompoop who left in such a hurry—Peters' other assistant."

Surprised, Danny glanced back at Rod. "I didn't know there was another."

A look of annoyance passed over Rod's face, and Starling's bellowing laugh set the glasses dancing again. "Well, there was—for three weeks. If I had my way, every damned mahogany cutter—"

"Easy, Father."

The voice came from the stairs. Danny saw the same face that had smiled at him out of the fog—the same small, pointed chin, the broad forehead, but now the hair was wound tightly about her head, in a single braid —thick, coarse hair, reflecting her father's vitality, and still damp from the sea. She seemed taller and a little older in the white dress that fell low over her shoulders; but the shoulders themselves were the same bronzy gold.

Forgetful of the others, Danny watched her, finding it hard to believe that this slender figure in white could have any real existence here in the Central American jungle; even harder to believe she was the same girl who had swum naked to his launch less than an hour ago. She smiled at him, and the full red lips moved in what might have been a silent greeting as she came toward him down the steps, while Danny was conscious of a marvellously

flexible body, and long legs beneath the shimmering whiteness of the gown.

Still smiling, she laid a hand against her father's cheek. "Watch the blood pressure, dear."

"Blood pressure be everlastingly blasted! Peters has brought in another assistant. Faith, this Gaylord fellow—"

"Gayforth, Father." She went to the table. "You'll all take Scotch, won't you?"

In silent approbation Danny saw how quietly she had shunted aside her father's gathering outburst. Here, in spite of all Anthony Starling's roaring, might be the real master of the hacienda, and Danny had just concluded that it was a wholly unpredictable household when the next second confirmed his judgment. From upstairs came a high, shrill note of glee; a white streak whizzed down the stair rail, and with a squeal of delight Dabs was sitting on the floor at Danny's feet.

She looked up triumphantly. "Bet you can't do that."

Lifting the child in his arms, Danny held her. "Is this the way you always arrive?"

"Sometimes I do it standing. Faith does it standing all the time—only not when there's company." The words came tumbling breathlessly, while the child's fascinated eyes never left Danny's hair—apparently she found its deep red colour irresistible.

Warmth began rising to Danny's cheeks, and he set her down. But Dabs wasn't that easily dismissed.

"Come see my menagerie. I've got two baby armadillos, and—"

Gently Faith interposed. "No, Dabs. Not to-night."

"Nuts. That means you want to talk to him." Dabs slipped a small hand into Danny's. "Let's go out on the porch."

With a feeling of being bodily appropriated, Danny let her lead him through the door.

A different world out here. The moon had climbed the waters of the lagoon, touching to life the long white ribbon of surf; and, with his hand in the child's, Danny watched the slow-changing glory of the night.

Dabs pointed to a wooded island. "That's Temple

Island. And there's the reef where you were stuck. Faith and I swim out there nearly every night. Maybe some night you'll swim with us? We could all put on suits."

"That would be more formal," Danny agreed.

But Dabs had glanced back towards the house. "Oh, for Pete's sake!"

Faith was coming across the porch, and Danny realized he was being rescued. Dabs did too. The small hand loosened from his and the child turned away, but he pulled her back.

"Don't go," he told her. "We haven't talked yet."

He felt the quiver of happy surprise, and as the frail body pressed closer to him, Faith smiled.

"You like children?"

"I like people generally." His eyes rose again to the moonlit world. "And I like this."

Her eyes followed his. "The jungle frightens some people."

"To me it's friendly."

"Maybe that's because you're a friendly person."

He looked quickly up. "Aren't most people down here?"

CHAPTER THREE

EYES on him, Faith seemed to weigh the question. "Life isn't always friendly or gentle down here," she said at last, "not always. Life can be very cruel and brutal in a place remote as this."

"It doesn't seem remote."

"You're two days from the nearest town, except for the village of Bajo. The boat stops here once a month, and there's no mail, no movie, no radio." She smiled. "That's what Rod Peters has brought you to."

"I'd go farther than that for Rod. He's done more for me than any man that ever lived. I took up engineering because of him—he helped me through school and got me my first job. Any old time Rod Peters wants my shirt, he can have it."

At the unconscious note of warmth in Danny's voice she smiled. "It's good to have such trust. Only—" She stopped, and in her eyes was something he had not seen before—it might have been compassion.

Inside, they were wrangling, and Danny heard Peters' incisive voice. "Bajo's a disgrace to any country." The rest was drowned in a roar from Starling.

"You talk like a half-baked social worker. Bajo's rough and ready, but they're a good bunch at heart. I'd rather have Bajo the way it is than this damned model village you prattle about."

Danny looked down at the girl. "Your father takes my breath away."

She smiled. "Father's always like this between books. When he starts work on a new one he's really well behaved."

"But to think of a human cyclone like him puttering around Aztec ruins."

"Maya ruins," she corrected, "and it's tremendously exciting."

He smiled at her. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-three."

"And at twenty-three you think Indian ruins are exciting. You know what I'd like? I'd like to take you to some hot spots that are really amusing."

Tranquilly she asked, "How old are you?"

"Twenty-five."

"And at twenty-five your life's goal is still a hot spot." Walking to the door, she glanced back over her shoulder, and this time there was mockery in her eyes. "Well, don't lose hope, Mr. Gayforth. You may find your hot spot down here. Your predecessor did."

Puzzled, he followed her. She had her father's disconcerting quality of sardonic amusement, and one thing Danny was sure of—she could take care of herself. But what was all the mystery about his predecessor?

The atmosphere inside was charged with discord. Peters' eyes were angry, and Starling's hair bristled more belligerently than ever. O'Hearn alone remained unruffled, devoting himself wholeheartedly to his cigar.

As Danny entered, Starling pulled himself out of his

chair. "I'm going to bed," he snorted at Peters. "We'll have a showdown on this to-morrow. You and what's his name—Gaylord—take the west room upstairs." He nodded curtly and left them.

Finishing their drinks, Danny and Peters climbed the stairs to a high-ceilinged room opening out on an upper verandah, and as Peters turned up the lamp, Danny watched him. Yes, he looked older, grayer around the temples, more gaunt beneath the cheekbones, and the eyes were not smiling as they should.

Locking the door, Peters threw himself into a chair, then with the abrupt directness that Danny so well remembered, he said, "It's about time you know why I sent for you, Danny. I'm in a jam."

Danny smiled. "You thrive on jams."

"Not this kind. I'm up against something, and I don't even know what it is." Peters gave a short laugh of irritation. "Danny, it's unadulterated hell to want a thing for ten years and—" He stopped; he seemed to be listening, then rapidly he went on.

"Ten years ago I came into this Lost Lagoon country, and the day I saw it I knew it was the place I'd always dreamed about—a land of black, fertile earth, virgin forests, and a river deep enough for ocean shipping. There never was such mahogany or such rich, deep soil, and I wondered why nobody had ever developed it.

"Well, I soon learned. Anthony Starling was one reason—he held a ninety-nine-year lease from the government on a big chunk of country, and he wouldn't even let a person ride over it if he could help. Another block was held by a mining company in Boston but the part I really wanted was involved in litigation, and nobody could buy it.

"And besides that, everyone told me this country was one of the toughest spots along the Central American coast, and people from outside weren't welcome. In the old days it was a pirate hangout, and it hasn't changed much since. Army deserters, escaped convicts still find good refuge in these jungles."

Danny looked thoughtful. "Doesn't sound like a garden spot to me."

"It could be. It's too good to go to waste, and I had an idea that wouldn't waste it. I didn't want the usual thing—just to cut off the cream of the timber and get out. I wanted to open up farm lands for workers, and start a town here that would be a model for the tropics.

"I'm not as young as I was—I wanted to make a home for myself here, and for the men who've been with me for years. A place where we could all work and live." Rod's eyes were shining the way Danny had seen them shine before. "A big dream, Danny. I had to wait almost ten years for my chance, and when it came I didn't have much time.

"Last year, when the rubber shortage was just on the horizon, I heard that the lawsuit had been settled, and the estate was willing to sell the land I wanted. I went to the government here and told them if they'd help me I'd take out the mahogany and plant rubber. If I succeeded, we might finally make this continent independent of the Far East. The government men were friendly but sceptical. Told me to prove it by getting out the mahogany, and promised me if I could clear the jungle and make the ground ready they'd supply the rubber seedlings and help me build the town. But first they wanted to be shown.

"I had to move quick. Other people were after the property. So I scraped together every cent I had, and beat them to the option. I borrowed up to the hilt—even cashed in my life insurance—I was so certain I could make it go."

He stopped. The light slowly died from his eyes; then he added, "Now I'm not so sure."

"What's gone wrong?"

"Just about everything. Shipments of tools went haywire, tractors broke down, men left me—good men I brought down from Honduras. No reason was given; they just packed their duffel and got their pay. Delay was everywhere. But not at first, Danny. That was the queer thing. It got worse gradually, as if they wanted to lead me on."

"Who are 'they'?"

"Anthony Starling, for one—he doesn't want me here, doesn't want anyone near his precious ruins."

"How can you hurt a ruin?"

"He's afraid we'll build roads through his ancient town sites, or my choppers may steal or destroy some of the relics. Actually, he just doesn't want anybody around. He's always been that way."

"Anybody else who doesn't want you?"

"Yes. Trent Mellett, superintendent of the Estrella Mines, ten miles up the river. Mellett follows Starling's lead—because of Faith, I think, although sometimes I suspect there are other motives I don't know about. But I do know this—Mellett's been stealing most of his mine timbers from my side of the boundary line."

"How can Mellett or anyone else freeze you out?"

"Dozens of ways. Intimidation is one—I believe that's why my assistant engineer quit."

"The one whose place I'm taking?"

"Yes. He left while I was up the river. Came to camp in a blue funk, too frightened to talk, and that same day he hired three Indians to paddle him down the coast and out of the country."

"He must have been scared pretty easily."

"That's what I thought until a bullet changed my mind."

It was as if a cold draught had crept across the room. Danny gave a low whistle. "Who did it?"

"I don't know. I was coming down river in the launch. The engine drowned the shot—I only heard the rip of wood when the bullet hit, and it hit six inches from my head."

"Maybe some worker you fired?"

"Peons don't carry guns. They settle their arguments with machetes. It couldn't have been Mellett—he was at Santa Nella. And it doesn't fit in with my picture of Starling to shoot at people from ambush. The fact remains somebody did it, and somebody may do it again. So I might be letting you in for a bad time."

Gayforth's eyes were still grave. "Bad times or good, you can count on me—you know that." Then he grinned.

"All of which is pretty big talk from a bozo who doesn't know a mahogany from a pine."

They were both smiling, and lightly Peters laid his hand on Danny's. "You've already brought the one thing I need—someone I can trust. We'll tackle this job together, old son." He began unlacing his boots. "And now, let's get some sleep. I'm dead on my feet."

But for Danny sleep wasn't so easy. Tired as he was, Rod's words had driven sleep away, and he lay there with wide-open eyes, watching a shaft of moonlight slowly moving across the wall. At last, kicking back the sheet, he tiptoed to the verandah for a smoke.

It was dark out there. The moon had just dipped behind a fragment of white cloud, and through that transitory gloom Danny's eyes followed the shadowy curving shore back to the fringe of jungle. Nothing had visibly changed out there, but somehow all its friendliness was gone.

Sharp and salt with the breath of the sea, the night wind rustled the dry palm leaves, and now, as the moon came sailing from behind the cloud, Danny knew he was not the only watcher in that moonlit world.

CHAPTER FOUR

Down at the edge of the knoll, screened by the shadow of the underbrush, a rider sat, and Danny recognized Faith Starling.

Erect and perfectly motionless in the saddle, only the upper half of her body was visible—a blouse and a leather windbreaker. Small head raised, alert, as if listening, she sat her horse, poised and wonderfully graceful in complete immobility. Then she turned down a path to the jungle and was gone.

Danny made no move! his eyes still fixed, his mind pondered the unanswered question—what errand called her back into the forest long after midnight?

Beneath the eaves, two bats began flying back and forth, and involuntarily Danny shivered. He felt drained

of all vitality, caught by currents whose purpose and direction he could not even guess.

Crushing out his cigarette, he went to bed.

He awoke to a sun-drenched world. Sitting bolt upright he could see the waves of the lagoon glittering before an offshore breeze. The fragrance of gardenias filled the room, and against a cloudless sky the tips of the palms nodded lazily. Luxuriously he stretched, slipped on his swimming trunks, and hurried out to the dock. At the very end he stood for a second, then, with a deep intake of breath, cut the water and began swimming toward the bar.

The water was warm, but not too warm. The tang of salt was in it, and before he had gone a hundred yards his blood was singing. That weight of foreboding had gone with the night. He was alive again, and rested, and he was young; he had all of life ahead and a job to do. Once, treading water, he looked back at the hacienda, clean and gleaming white in the sunlight. He almost shouted. Diving deeply, he opened his eyes to the blurred undersea about him; then, coming up, swam slowly back towards the hacienda.

A saddled horse stood outside the door, and as Danny entered the verandah, he heard a deep, persuasive voice. "I'm not being hasty, dear," the voice was saying. "Believe me, I've thought this all out."

Standing very close to Faith Starling was a tall man, dressed much like Peters in high-top boots, khaki riding breeches, white shirt and broad-brimmed hat. Taller even than Danny, the frame was closely knit, the neck strong and columnar. He might have been thirty-one—not more—but his hair at the sides was touched with grey, his face keen to the point of angularity.

Faith murmured something too low to hear, then catching sight of Danny in the doorway, she took a quick step back.

"Good swim?" Her voice showed no sign of surprise, and quietly she added, "Mr. Gayforth, this is Trent Mellett, one of your very few neighbours."

It was a strong, firm handshake, and a smile that

Danny liked—but a puddle of water was forming around Danny's feet, and he ran for the stairs. "I'd better get out of this before Don Antonio mows me down," he called back, and heard Mellett's quick laugh.

Peters was already seated before a breakfast of fruit and chocolate, and, after rubbing himself dry, Danny joined him.

"Your friend Mellett's downstairs," he announced. "And apparently very much at home. He was standing so close to Miss Starling you couldn't slip a cigarette paper between them. What goes?"

Peters shrugged. "I wouldn't know. But if Mellett's here, it looks like a council of war."

Peters' guess was right. When they reached the lower floor, Anthony, Faith, and Mellett were talking in a little group, and Danny could feel conflict in the very air. Starling's frown had brought his eyebrows to a bristling phalanx, and the smile was gone from Mellett's face. Even Faith's eyes seemed less friendly.

Warily Mellett and Peters shook hands, then Anthony spoke.

"Peters," the heavy voice rumbled, "we might as well have this out. What are you going to do up Lost River?"

"Cut mahogany." Peters' voice was very quiet, and Danny remembered that before the storm Peters' voice was always like that—quiet—and the blue-grey eyes watchful.

"We know you're going to cut mahogany," Starling boomed with impatience. "But where? On this side of the river or the other? And where are your camps going to be? What's the sense in being so evasive?"

Danny saw Rod's eyes tighten. "I evaded nothing. Until three weeks ago I didn't know myself where I was going to start. It depended on where I could put my roads. You're the one who's being evasive, Anthony. Why don't you say what's on your mind? You don't want me to cut anywhere on this side of the river until you're through excavating. Well, that's impossible, but I'll try not to interfere with your work."

"Interfere! Hell's steaming cauldrons! With tractors and a hundred low-grade morons turned loose with axes

and saws, how in the name of suffering humanity can you help interfere? Why can't you cut on Temple Island, where I'm through digging?"

"I can. But the best mahogany is inland. Anthony"—Peters' voice was still patient—"do you expect to keep everybody out of this country just so you can dig in it?"

"I don't want anybody on this side of the river."

"Then I'm sorry. That's exactly where I'm going to start."

For the first time Trent Mellett spoke. "Aren't you overlooking me, Mr. Peters?"

The words came with no special emphasis, but they held an unmistakable overtone of warning, and Danny made a mental note that here was a man who might be a formidable adversary.

"No, I haven't overlooked you, Mellett," Rod answered. "You don't want me here either. Why?"

"Because Doctor Starling doesn't want you." Mellett glanced at Faith and smiled. "Whatever he wants is good enough for me."

"That's one reason."

Mellett smiled. "And the other?"

"From the number of tree stumps along the river, I'd say you've been doing a comfortable business getting your mining and dock timbers from the forests in my concession. Naturally you don't like to see that pleasant practice end."

"Perhaps—perhaps not. But you'll be foolish to buck the two of us, Peters."

"What will you do if I try?"

"Break you," Mellett answered. In voice and manner lay no vestige of anger. If anything, he spoke a little regretfully, as one who accepts an unpleasant but necessary task. "I'll put every obstacle in your way. I'll turn Bajo against you, I'll outbid you for supplies, and in the end I'll ruin you."

Peters' eyes were beginning to glint. "Why don't you come out in the open, Mellett? You've got Bajo in your pocket; even your miners can't call their souls their own; you fix their wages and their living conditions, and if they don't like what you do it's just too bad. Why not be

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honest and say that you're the big boss here and you're not going to see anybody come in and change things?" Peters opened the porch door, then very deliberately he looked back. "I don't intend to let any man or any group of men run me out. Whatever you and Starling do, I'm going through with this job." He left the hacienda.

Danny turned to follow, but as he passed Mellett he stopped. "I take it you're Doctor Starling's official bouncer in these parts."

Mellett laughed, and both his laugh and eyes were free of resentment. "I don't blame you for saying that. But I'm not so bad an egg. It's just that this country is our home, and we don't want it ruined."

"Could be. But it looks like a grandstand play to me." Danny held out his hand to Faith. "Thanks for everything, and love to Dabs."

She smiled. "Come again."

From the dock Danny saw Faith and Mellett wave to him. He lifted his hat and grinned at Peters as the launch started. "One nice thing, Boss—if they throw us out on our necks, it'll be in the most friendly spirit."

But Peters' face was set. "Forget about the friendly part. It's war from to-day on."

Busy with their own thoughts, the two men chugged across the lagoon and up the muddy river. It narrowed rapidly, and after the first bend the sea was left behind. Both banks had become green walls of solid vegetation, where giant lianas trailed in the sluggish current, and alligators lay sunning on every decaying log. Beyond reach of the sea breeze, Danny felt the first hint of tropical heat.

"Wouldn't be surprised if it gets warm around here," he ventured.

Peters laughed. "Wait a while. This is the cool of the morning."

A half-hour later Peters pointed upstream. "Now, old son, I'll show you the sweet little village of Bajo. Take a good look, for you'll see lots more of it."

Not much to see. Four corrugated tin warehouses perched on the edge of a rotting dock, and beyond, stretching along a bare mud bank, a solitary street of

wooden buildings in varying stages of decrepitude. This was Bajo. Its excuse for existence was twofold. It was the head of navigation, where boats of medium draught could discharge their cargoes, and it was the one place within two days' journey where Trent Mellett's miners might come down on payday and buy forgetfulness of mine shafts. Bajo, too, so legend ran, served as a quiet port for smugglers and drifters from the hinterlands, men who never stayed long, never went anywhere in particular, always on the move.

But Danny was to see no more of Bajo until late afternoon. A tramp steamer from Honduras was unloading the last cargo of Peters' machinery, and Danny found himself thrown headlong into the job of helping check obscure lists of equipment as it rattled down over the deck and was carried by sweating *cargadores* into the warehouses.

Spikes, chains, pickaroons, drums of oil, gasoline, tractor engines, saws, and axes. For three hours they came in a constant stream, followed by cases on cases of canned food.

"You must have an army up there," Danny said wearily.

"Wait until you see the heavy equipment. You've got to look six months ahead in this country. You can't just phone downtown and have them send up a tractor engine or a dozen sparkplugs."

"I never knew a boat that size could hold so much." Danny was bending over a large crate. "What's V-8—an automobile engine?"

"It's vegetable juice for the camp, you lug. There ought to be three crates."

By four o'clock the job was finished, the *cargadores* paid off, and the doors of the warehouse closed.

Peters laughed at Danny's wilted shirt. "I know a place where they have cold beer." He picked up his hat. "Incidentally, you will now get a close-up of the metropolis of Bajo."

They mounted a flight of rickety steps that rose from the river to a hot, smelly street, baked by the sun to rutted steel, where scrawny chickens scratched in unrewarded search. Three saddle mules with drooping heads

stood tethered outside a cantina, and as Danny walked along he counted the saloons—five in two blocks. To the left they passed a row of unpainted, single-storeyed shacks where girls were sitting in the doorways, with faded wrappers about their shouiders. They looked incuriously at the two men, and Danny saw the heavily smeared lipstick and mascara.

"By night they'll be over in the cantina to welcome Trent's miners," Peters told him. "This is a tough town, Danny. Antony Starling can't believe that, but it's true. The government tried twice to clean it up—but Bajo won't stay cleaned. That's one reason why I'm not popular here. They know if I ever bring in a crew of rubber workers with their families, this sort of thing will have to go." Peters pointed to a side street. "Up there is O'Hearn's little hospital."

"How near are we to your camp?" Danny asked.

"Two miles by river, a mile and a half by road—when there is a road. Here's where we get our beer."

It was a large three-storey building, with the words CANTINA VENUS over the doorway; and, entering, Danny saw a long mahogany bar. Beside the door stood a roulette wheel; a battery of slot machines ranged the farther wall, and the walls themselves were liberally decorated with voluptuous nudes. At least twenty men were drinking inside, most of them *cargadores* Peters had just paid off, but a few wore small lamps in their hats, and had heavy gloves strapped to their belts—Trent Mellett's miners. The smell of stale beer and whisky lingered in the air, flies were buzzing about the glasses, and an automatic piano blared in Danny'e ears.

"Pleasant place," he commented.

Peters nodded toward a flight of steps. "The real ritzy stuff is upstairs—a super dance-hall, night-club affair, with private booths and a dance floor the size of a checker board." Peters gave a start of surprise. "Hello, there's Trent."

Near the cash register Trent Mellett was talking to a small, dark man with patent-leather hair and ears that stood out almost at right angles, giving him a perpetually startled appearance.

Peters dropped his voice. "The jug-eared gent is Alfredo Bardi. He owns this place—and a lot of other things. Come over and meet him."

Making a mental note that Bardi's handclasp was moist and loose, Danny ordered beer and, while the others talked, looked at the faces about him. Apparently everyone knew Peters, but even when they spoke to him there was a surly watchfulness in their eyes. The very air was unfriendly, and Trent smiled as Danny hurried to gulp his beer down.

"What's the matter, Bub?" he asked. "Don't you like seeing the world?"

The tone of amused patronage made Danny redden. "This part of the world seems a trifle noisy." He rolled a cigarette.

Bardi laughed loudly, showing a flash of gold dentures. "Come down some pay-night, if you want to hear real noise."

"I don't," Danny answered, and again Bardi laughed. A few minutes later Peters and Danny started for camp. Trent waited until the door swung closed, then he turned to Bardi, and his eyes were tight.

"There's a job you'd better finish, Alfredo."

CHAPTER FIVE

MELLETT'S voice was coldly casual. "But I don't want any killing. Killing means investigations and red tape."

"What do you want, then?" Bardi raised his shoulders. "I grazed him with one bullet. He doesn't scare."

"Wing him this time."

"It takes a good shot to do that and not kill him."

Trent frowned. "You mean it takes more money, you two-bit Jesse James. Well, do the job right and you'll get the money."

"What about this other one?"

"Gayforth? Don't bother. Peters is all we need. But mind this—it's got to look like an accident—and no rough stuff near Starling's place. The old goat still thinks you're nice clean boys down here."

Peters had located his main camp on the west bank of Lost River, five miles by trail from the Starling hacienda. It was beyond reach of the cool trade winds, and more than once during the next few days Danny found himself thinking of the hacienda as a relinquished paradise.

There were almost a hundred men in camp, most of them old workers who had been with Peters for years—industrious, self-respecting people, skilled in their craft, and as Peters had said, between his men and the riffraff of Bajo there was little common meeting ground. Many had brought their families and were living in thatched-roof dwellings above the mill site. The rest were quartered in bunkhouses.

After the squalor of Bajo, Danny was surprised at the cleanliness and order of the camp. Kitchen and mess hall were immaculate; a filtering plant had been installed for drinking water and for outdoor showers. The smallest shack showed unmistakable signs of pride in possession and a sense of permanency.

The amount of equipment amazed Danny. There were sheds filled with tractors, rows of bulldozers and trailers. One building bulged with kegs of nails, tools, spare parts of engines; another was heaped high with canned food, dehydrated vegetables, and what seemed to Danny literally tons of coffee.

"Do you need all this?" he asked Peters.

"And more. You saw some of the stuff down at the warehouses. It costs money to log mahogany—more money than I have. But later I can use these tractors and bulldozers for clearing land. I've got two million rubber seedlings on order from the Amazon, and the mahogany I cut this year will pay the interest on the money I've borrowed. Next year I start planting."

The camp itself consisted of four large buildings, a dock, and a still unfinished powerhouse on the river bank; upstream a boiler and log carriage marked the location of a small portable sawmill to provide bridge timber and rough lumber; a board building served Peters and Danny as office and sleeping quarters.

That night, by the light of a lantern, Danny grinned ruefully down at the electric razor in his suitcase. "I'll

need you," he lamented, "about the time I need a pair of ice skates."

He looked around at the bare little room. "Where are the beds, Rod?"

Peters pointed unsmiling at two hammocks that lay coiled up in a corner. "Take your choice of those."

"Suffering mackerel! Do you use those things to sleep in?"

"Don Antonio does—every night."

"That overstuffed gorilla risks his life in one of these?" Cautiously Danny strung the nearest hammock and climbed inside. He lay there unspeaking until Peters blew out the light, and the creak of the hammock told him the boss had gone to bed.

Then he heard Rod's voice. "How goes it?"

"Just grand. My big toe is six inches from my chin."

"You'll never be comfortable that way, Danny. You sleep across the hammock."

"Do I. Well, I'll lay you even money I don't sleep at all."

The first week after Danny's arrival, Peters kept him busy learning the details of the camp. Actual timber cutting was barely begun. The past months had been months of preparation and heartbreaking delay. Machinery was late; a protracted rainy season had washed out two bridges, but the groundwork for actual timber operations was almost done. The first of the two main logging roads had been cut through the jungle, tractors were assembled, and once the bridges were finished they would be ready to send out mahogany hunters to locate the richest groves and make ready for the cut.

At the end of that week Peters sent Danny back for his first taste of life in the jungle.

"It's going to be hard sledding at first," Rod told him the night before he left. "You'll make blunders, and you'll face setbacks. But this is a fight against time, and I know you'll come through. Your job is to build camps for the cutters and survey truck trails for the boys before cutting starts. I'll send Feagan with you until you get on to the ropes."

Feagan—if he had any other name, Danny never learned it—was a pure product of the tropics. Born in Trinidad, his life was the Caribbean Coast. He had been a banana farmer, coffee grower, and proprietor of a pool hall in Havana. But the thing Feagan knew and loved best was mahogany. Five years ago he had attached himself to Peters on a mahogany job in Costa Rica, and since then there had grown up on Feagan's side a dog-like, unquestioning devotion, and on Peters' a whole-hearted admiration for this loyal, unpredictable Irishman.

Stocky, perfectly bald, with eyes that squinted just a little, and a stubble of grizzled beard, he had a voice that could rasp above the screech of a saw, and a slight limp from misjudging the direction of a falling tree. But above all else, Feagan was unforgettable as a living specimen of the art of tattoo. Chest, back, shoulders, and arms—not a square inch remained unadorned. At some time in his life he must have sat for countless hours, a patient sacrifice to Art. There were birds, serpents, and butterflies; there were ships and waving flags. On his left shoulder was an intimate study of Aphrodite rising from the waves, and his back was given over to a Reubensesque group of rollicking mermaids.

Danny was entranced. "Every time Feagan takes off his shirt," he told Peters, "it's like a trip to the National Museum."

If Feagan's great love was mahogany, his equally great phobia was woman. What had happened back in his past no one—not even Peters—ever knew, but it had left him with a profound sense of woman's instability, a subject he discoursed on with eloquence and conviction.

When Feagan learned that Danny was to be attached to his gang, the Irishman sighed. He didn't approve of Danny's refusal to take life seriously, and he couldn't conceive of any man of Danny's years being so abysmaliy ignorant of mahogany.

And those first weeks, it was inevitable that Danny should feel a profound sense of his own shortcomings—even if Feagan hadn't painstakingly pointed them out.

But he was too busy learning and too much interested to worry.

"I don't mind working like a dog," he explained to Feagan at the end of a particularly trying day, "but I can't bother worrying. The Boss didn't hire me to chew my fingernails."

Only one thing Danny did regret—to be cut off from the hacienda and from seeing Faith and Dabs. That was the enemy's camp. Yet hardly a day went by without his thinking of the clear waters of the lagoon, and the wide porch where a breeze was always blowing. He remembered Dabs, staring with open fascination at his red hair, and the smiling, challenging eyes of Faith.

The mystery and endless variety of the jungle delighted him. He loved it best at dawn, when the air was still fresh and cool, and the sky dotted with the first flights of parrots. And at evening came the great jungle silence when the green dusk deepened. It was then most of all Danny became aware of the unseen, teeming life going on about him, a life infinitely older than man's, shy and alert, lurking back among the shadows, its only trace a rustle in the trees above, or a faint imprint in the soft earth of the waterholes.

Here was a new, adventurous world of buttressed forest giants that had known a thousand years of living, a world of green, mysterious half-light, where the sun never reached. This was the main forest—virgin mahogany country, where time itself stood still, changeless, just as it had been in the days before Columbus. Trees that dwarfed man to insignificance, their trunks grey-green with lichens, their great horizontal branches gay with innumerable orchids. Small arboreal animals lived out their lives up on those branches, without ever touching ground, and birds chirped too far off to be seen. One heard the patter of rain against the leaves long before it dripped to the soft, bare jungle floor.

Meanwhile, the rainy season lingered. Black clouds filled the sky each afternoon, and, as the workers crouched for shelter beneath their palm-thatched lean-to, torrential downpours lashed the forest. Then, just before evening, the skies cleared, the sun burst through, and the jungle

steamed like a cosmic Turkish bath, while Danny would wring out his shirt and pour the water from his shoes. Life's realities were narrowing to a simple succession of work and sleep—the hum of mosquitoes at night, the din and chatter of sweating peons by day.

But Danny was catching on. He learned how to sleep across his hammock so that his spine was still in one piece by morning, and there, enmeshed in a huge mosquito net, he would lie like a giant cocoon, listening with cosy satisfaction to the whirr of angry insects baulked in their hunting.

To the peons he was soon *muy simpatico*. He had a friendly way toward them that helped compensate for his inexperience, although from the first he sensed an undercurrent of unrest, a vague atmosphere of uneasiness—nothing tangible, nothing he could put into words, but it was there like a formless indefinable shadow.

As for blunders, he made a world of them. One blunder might have been serious—it had to do with Mellett.

Feagan was back at headquarters camp that morning; Danny had set his crew gathering palmetto to thatch the roofs of his new buildings, and after lunch he sat smoking a cigarette, watching them weave the first layer. Work was going smoothly and, lost in lazy contemplation, Danny heard no sound until Faith Starling reined in her horse a few feet away.

His eyes widened—she might have been a lovely native. The blouse was an Indian *huipil,* and through her thick brown hair brightly coloured ribbons were braided, in the custom of Mayan women. The white shorts that came just above her knees were the same her father's peons wore, and the brown feet in the stirrups were bare. Always, Danny told himself, she had a way of looking different—and exciting—and this time her colour was high and her eyes bright. Twice her fretful horse reared to turn, but she held the animal effortlessly in hand.

"As a neighbour, you're a bitter disappointment." She smiled down at him. "Do you think our hacienda's quarantined?"

Danny scrambled to his feet, conscious of two things—

surprise at her friendly tone, and keen pleasure at seeing her.

She lighted a cigarette. "Dabs has been down in the dumps ever since you left. Devotion at first sight—and then you walk out on her."

"Has anybody else missed me?"

She laughed. "No one mentioned it."

"I was afraid of that. Dabs seems to be my upper age limit."

"But, why haven't you been over for a drink and a swim? We're only five miles from here by the river trail."

"Well, to be honest, I didn't think anybody wanted me. The last time I saw you, you made me feel like a stepchild."

She glanced at his hair. "A redheaded stepchild?"

"We'll skip that. But your father—"

"Oh, Father swears you're due for a bad end, but you needn't come to see him—come see Dabs, or even me."

In her voice Danny sensed an implicit warmth, as if this might be her way of telling him that she hadn't made her father's quarrel her own. There was so much comfort in the thought that for the first time Danny realized he had been lonely. He realized, too, that of all the people along that isolated stretch of coast she was nearest his own age—and that she was very lovely.

"You know what?" he said. "I'm glad you rode over."

"So am I." Their shared smile brought them closer; it was like a pact between them, without the need for words.

"Any time—" Danny stopped.

Beyond the curtain of jungle a horse's hoofs were pounding, and Trent Mellett rode into the clearing, his eyes dark with annoyance, his horse flecked with lather. Without a look at Danny, he clattered up beside Faith. "What were you trying to do, lose me?"

She laughed. "If I only could."

"Sometime," he fumed, "you'll break your neck taking a muddy trail at a gallop."

"Yes, papa."

Glancing at Danny, Faith laughed again, and Trent's face flushed. If she was deliberately trying to anger him, she was certainly succeeding.

She turned back to Danny. "Now tell me what you've been doing."

"I work like a peon all day, and at night Feagan tells me how I should have done it." He held up his hands. "See these calluses? I got them setting the corner posts of those buildings, and that wood's heavy as iron."

"It's doing you good—you look positively rugged."

She was deliberately ignoring Trent, but he wasn't even listening. Riding to the newly completed building, he ran his hand over the rough, square-hewed timber that supported the roof.

For the first time he spoke to Danny. "Where did you get these?" he asked.

"Those timbers? Bought them. They came from an abandoned mine."

"Who told you about the abandoned mine?"

"Three men I gave jobs to a few days ago. They seemed to know the country."

Trent's hand slapped down on the saddle horn. His already ragged temper was not improving. "I'll say they know this country. Send them here; I want to talk to them."

Danny was beginning to resent the peremptory tone, but he walked over to the river bank and called up three men. They came toward him, tools in their hands; then, at sight of Mellett, stopped with white, frightened faces. Kicking his horse closer, Mellett lashed out at them in angry Spanish, and once he raised his riding crop in a threatening gesture.

Danny intervened. "Go easy with that! They're my men, you know."

"Are they?" Eyes blazing, Mellett jumped from his horse, and the peons made at a terrified run for the jungle.

CHAPTER SIX

COMPLETELY mystified, his own anger rising, Danny was sure of only one thing—he had lost three good workers.

"This isn't helping me build a camp." He tried to speak quietly. "My men—"

"Your men!" Mellett pointed to the timbers that had begun the trouble. "I suppose these are yours, too?"

"Why not? I paid for them. They're from an abandoned—"

"Oh, to hell with that flimsy story! You're like every other gyp outfit. You go through a country like a swarm of locusts. The mine these timbers came from belongs to my company and those men know it. And they knew you'd be too dumb to check up on them."

Danny began to see light. Half to himself he said, "I didn't know."

"It's your business to know. There are some things even dumbness won't excuse."

The cold contempt of voice and words made little red spots dance before Danny's eyes. He knew he should have looked into the transaction more carefully—Feagan would have, so would Peters—but he also knew that Mellett was making the most of it—and before Faith Starling.

"Let's go easy on that sort of talk." He kept his own voice low. "I wasn't trying to steal your timbers. I simply didn't know."

"That's why Peters hired you, wasn't it? Whatever happens, you just don't know. Well, there's a limit to that game."

Those little red dots were dancing faster, but Danny made one last effort. "I'll be glad to pay you for the timbers."

"You won't pay me. You'll put them back."

"That means ripping down three whole buildings!"

"The time to think of that was before you stole them."

Within Danny something snapped. "They tell me you know a lot about stealing timber."

Faces flushed, eyes tight, the two men had passed beyond the bounds of caution. Mellett took a step forward.

"What you need, Bub, is a lesson here and now."

Danny felt his shoulder muscles twitch, and gave up the struggle—it would be a relief to get the thing over with. Evenly he answered, "I'm just aching for any lesson you can teach me."

He saw Trent's hand flash upward; his own hands rose, then he heard the sudden creak of saddle leather, and Mellett's dark face was blotted out as Faith forced her horse between them.

"Trent!" Her voice cut like a whip. "If you two have to act like bad-tempered children, don't do it before a crew of peons." Her angry eyes held Mellett. "You ought to know better, even if he doesn't."

Trent stepped back. He saw that the workers were watching.

"You're right." Walking to his horse, he mounted. "Some other time, Gayforth," he called, and rode down the trail.

Danny looked up at Faith, and noncommittally he smiled, but there was no answering smile.

"You have a lot to learn about this country, young man." All the friendliness had gone from her voice. "I saved you from a beating just now." Lifting the reins, she turned away.

"You saved *me*!" Danny glared after her. "Lady, the one mortal you saved was the boy friend."

The memory of that encounter haunted him. He was angry at himself, angry at the peons for lying to him, and angry at Mellett. But keenest of all he felt a growing resentment toward Faith—why did she have to take sides against him?

It was that same evening Carlos O'Hearn chugged up in his launch and stopped for coffee and a smoke. The doctor had heard the story of the mine timber and pretended to be profoundly shocked.

"So young, and yet a hardened criminal." He lowered his huge frame gingerly into a chair. Then, suddenly serious, "But tell me about it."

Attentively he listened to Danny's tale, and at the end he nodded. "Down here, Senor Gayforth, one does not pry into the affairs of others. But have you considered that what happened to-day might have all been planned?"

"How?"

"*Bueno*. If one wished to prejudice your position here, would it be so difficult to arrange for several men to work for you and get you into difficulties? Mind, I do not assert—I merely suggest." Again he lapsed into silence. "It is a strange family, the Melletts," he said at last. "Have you met Andra, the sister?"

"No."

"You must. She seldom leaves her brother's hacienda at the mine. A very complex personality—if she dislikes you, may the Good God help you. But you will find her interesting."

Danny had his doubts. Temporarily, at least, he sympathized with Feagan's point of view—there were too many women in the world. But to the doctor he only said, "If she's Trent's sister, I'll be in the doghouse from the start."

"Doghouse?" Don Carlos pondered the dark saying.

"I mean she'll side with Mellett, just as Faith Starling did."

"Possibly. One can't say. But Andra Mellett has a mind of her own—a better mind than Trent."

"Is she pretty?"

Broadly the doctor smiled. "*Madre de mi alma,* never once does a man ask, 'Is she clever, is she interesting?' but always, 'Is she pretty?' Well, senor, in Andra Mellett's case I have never decided. She has not the same loveliness as Faith Starling, but there is about her something one does not forget. On the surface she is more remote than Faith. One might think she is without passion; but there, I think, one would be wrong. It would be truer to say she is afraid of her own impulses." O'Hearn turned the cigar in his fat fingers. "My wisdom about women always impresses me."

He rose. "Thanks for the coffee. We shall meet soon."

They met next day. Through a torrential downpour a messenger reached Danny's camp with word to come at once to the Starling hacienda. It was *muy importante,* and Danny urged his mule at dead run down the muddy trail.

Wet to the skin, he skirted the lagoon, and just beyond the bar he saw an oil tanker, almost invisible in the rain; three launches were drawn up at the Starling dock, and with a sense of foreboding Danny kicked his steaming mule over the last slippery mile.

O'Hearn met him on the porch. His coat was off, sleeves rolled up, and his forehead moist with perspiration. Then Danny looked into the doctor's eyes, and his heart stopped beating.

"Rod?" he whispered.

"Your friend is gravely hurt. A bullet, involving the spinal cord. I sent a launch to intercept that tanker, for his only chance is to reach the States. Here I have not the equipment to help him. If he is to live, he will need your best care on the voyage, day and night. I will tell you what you must do."

"How was he shot?"

"That, senor, I do not know. Trent Mellett brought him in the launch." O'Hearn laid a hand on Danny's arm. "All morning he has asked for you, and if he is strong enough to talk, you may go to him. He is in Don Antonio's library. Wait for me here."

Numb with despair, Danny stood staring out into the rain-lashed world. One thought alone kept pounding like a triphammer through his brain—they wanted to get Rod Peters away from here, and now they had done it. Hands closed, his eyes brooded over the mist-grey jungle, and again he felt the cold, implacable threat of it; then, conscious that other eyes were watching him, he turned, and across the verandah saw Faith standing between her father and Trent Mellett.

Quickly the girl came forward, her face touched with compassion. "I know how you must feel," she said.

Danny moistened his lips. "Tell me just what happened."

It was Trent who answered. "There's not much to tell.

It happened outside the warehouse in Bajo. Peters was loading a truck on the dock where some drunken *cargadores* were wrangling. A gun went off and shot him. I came in from the mine a few minutes later, and when they told me O'Hearn was down river, I brought Peters here."

Mechanically Danny wiped the rain from his face. "Will you get Feagan to send Peters' stuff and mine on the next boat?"

Trent nodded. "I'll tell him to pay the men off, too."

Pay the men off! The words brought a new realization. They were finished. They were finished, and going back to the States—beaten. Peters' ten-year dream was over. He saw O'Hearn beckoning from the doorway.

On a cot in the library Danny found him. The face was pitifully pale, but at the sound of footsteps Peters' eyes flickered open.

"Good old Danny. Knew you'd come." It was the merest shadow of a voice.

"How's it going, Boss?"

"Not too good."

"We'll fix all that." He laid his hand on the hot face. "I'm taking you back to the States."

With feeble vehemence Peters shook his head. "Not you. You've got to stay."

"I've got to take care of you."

"Other people can do that." Peters struggled to his elbow. "I can't talk much, Danny. Don't make me. You're the only one I can trust. Your job's to keep things going here."

"Let me go with you, Rod." Danny's nails were cutting into the palms of his hands. "I'll come back. Just let me see you safe in the hospital."

"There isn't time." The voice was weakening. "Danny, if ever I needed help, it's now. You've got to carry on for me or I'm through. I can't talk any more, Danny—it's—"

The pale, worn face sank to the cot. O'Hearn was signalling from the doorway, and Danny walked back to the outer room. Starling stood frowning by the door; Faith was helping Mellett pack a bag with

medical supplies; and the smell of drenched earth hung heavy in the air. Faith looked up as Danny entered.

"Rod wants me to stay," he said quietly.

"*Stay*!" Three incredulous voices echoed the word.

"He wants me to take over his job."

A long pause. Deliberately Mellett closed the bag and rose. "Gayforth, at a time like this I'm going to be very blunt. You haven't a chance here. You don't know the mahogany game, and you don't know the country. Isn't that true?"

Mutely Danny nodded.

"If Peters had stayed," Mellett glanced toward Starling, "I would have done everything I could to block him. If you stay, I'll do the same to you. Your place is with Peters. He's a sick man, and if anything happens on the way back, you'll blame yourself as long as you live."

Mellett ceased, and Starling's voice rumbled agreement. "Why don't you face it, boy? You're no use here. Nobody wants you. Peters needs you."

How they wanted him to go! As if to some final arbiter, Danny looked across the room toward Faith. Her eyes were softer than he had ever seen them, but she only said, "I think you ought to go."

She too. Slowly Danny straightened. Well, what did they matter? They had been against him from the very start. The only person in the world who mattered lay in that inner room, broken, perhaps, dying.

From out over the lagoon came the deep roll of the boat's whistle. Danny saw O'Hearn walk by him with two peons, carrying Rod on a stretcher. They stopped, while the doctor laid an oilskin tarp over the sheet. The room had gone suddenly still—only the hiss of rain against the palms, the drip of water from the eaves.

O'Hearn was holding open the door. "Come, Senor Gayforth."

Danny had dropped to his knees beside the stretcher. The haggard face looked up, the blue-grey eyes were on him; no mistaking the message that pleaded in those pain-racked eyes.

"It's all right, Boss." Danny's lips moved stiffly.

"Don't worry. We'll keep the logs rolling." He turned a white face to the doctor and drew a breath that was almost a sob. "Take him on board," he said.

"But you, senor?"

"I'm staying here."

CHAPTER SEVEN

ROD PETERS' stretcher had reached the wharf.

Through wind-lashed rain Danny saw O'Hearn helping the peons lower it to the launch, and suddenly his eyes blurred—they were taking Rod away, and he himself was staying on among people who had been Peters' enemies, people who would be enemies to him.

Never in his life had Danny felt so unwanted, so utterly alone. Bleakly he looked up. They were watching him silently—Faith by the fireplace, Trent and Starling coldly appraising him; and out of his very desolation something within him snapped.

"Well, why don't you say it?" The pent-up misery of that past hour sharpened his voice. "You've all been hoping for this. You're glad he was shot. Now he won't bother you any more."

Starling's eyebrows bristled. "You young moron!" He waved a warning fist. "Just one more—"

"*Papa!*" Dabs had run to Danny's side. Hands tight, thin legs not quite steady, the child seemed doll-like between those two tall men, but she faced her father with terrified resolve.

"You let him be." Her voice was trembling, and protectively her hand reached out to Danny's. With smarting eyes he looked down at her, then stooping, kissed her. He saw Faith's hand rise to her throat and, half-expecting her to speak, waited through the long moment's silence, but without a word she turned away.

Danny picked up his poncho, and his freckled face had set. At the door he turned. "There's something you all better know. Just as long as Rod Peters lives I'm staying here to finish the job you and the wolf pack in Bajo

wouldn't let him do. You couldn't frighten him out; you couldn't wear him down. It took a bullet in the back."

Frowning, Mellett came toward him. "Listen, Gayforth. We're willing to overlook a lot, but try to remember that shot was an accident."

"Was it? Well, it's going to take just that kind of accident to get rid of me."

"Good for you!"

It was a woman's voice, from close behind him, and Danny turned to see a girl standing outside the door. Her raincoat gleamed with water, and the hood, pulled back over her forehead, revealed a pair of tawny topaz eyes that looked at him in frank approval.

A long, unhurried look, then once again she said "Good for you," and stepped inside. The hood of her raincoat rustled as she threw it off, freeing a mass of bamboo-coloured hair. The face was pale, the features finely drawn, the skin translucent. She might have been a woman of pastel except for those deep-burning, restless eyes.

Glancing at the others, a faint smile moved her lips, but when she spoke it was to Danny.

"I'm Andra Mellett, Trent's sister. They told me what happened to Rod Peters, and I came down to see if I could help."

Danny raised his hand toward the lagoon. "He's gone."

"Yes, I heard what you said. You have courage."

"Look here, Andra!" Trent broke in angrily. "You don't understand."

Her face never moved. Only her eyes turned; a look imperious and lightning swift passed between brother and sister, and Trent stood silenced. Again that shadowy smile of hers came and went. "There's nothing hard to understand. The air in this room is crackling." She came closer to Danny. "You're not wanted, Mr. Gayforth. But don't let that bother you. The way to live is the way you want to live."

Small and intense, she seemed a thing of nerves and steel springs. She was looking at Faith now; and the eyes

of both women became very quiet, as if a gauntlet had been thrown—and accepted.

Danny pulled open the door, then looked down at Andra. "Thanks," he murmured, and stepped outside. But he heard the rustle of her raincoat behind him.

"Wait!" she called, and that note of command was in her voice. "I'll run you back to camp in my launch. You've been through enough down here." Taking his answer for granted, she walked before him to the dock.

Rain still pattered among the palms, but out on the horizon a blue ribbon of sky stretched upward, and through rising mists a pale rainbow curved. Beyond the lagoon Peters' boat had reached the tanker.

Eyes fixed on the far-off steamer, Danny stood in a last mute communion, then his lips trembled. "He's got to live! He's just got to!" It was a whispered prayer welling up out of the depths of him for the one man who had been his friend.

"You have your life to live, too," the girl reminded him. "And that's the only one you can do much about." She spoke not in remonstrance, but as if to recall him to the realities of his own plight. Then, in softer tone, she added, "I'm glad you're staying. I'm glad whenever a person has courage to follow his own path. You can't always do that if you're a woman."

Without answering, he helped her into the launch, but, guessing his thought, she asked, "Does it sound strange for me to want you to stay when my brother wants you to go?"

"Yes."

"It wouldn't if you knew us better. We've never exactly worked in pairs, my brother and I."

"But why does he want me to go? I'm not interfering with him."

"You're interfering with Anthony Starling, and Anthony Starling is Faith's father. What Faith wants, Trent wants—she sees to that. It sounds catty, but truth often does." Andra spoke casually, but the pupils of her eyes had grown smaller.

She took the wheel as Danny started the motor, and he sat silent and brooding, watching the muddy waters

ripple by, while the day brightened, and in understanding Andra did not speak again. Once she lighted a cigarette, inhaled deeply a few times, and flicked it into the river.

Not until they reached Peters' camp did Danny realize they had made the journey in complete silence, and that she was looking at him, waiting for him to speak. Rising, he took her hand.

"Don't think I'm not grateful for what you said and did down there at Starling's. It meant a lot. Maybe some day I can tell you how much. You and Dabs are the only ones who haven't treated me like a leper."

She shook her head until the pale gold hair glistened. "You mustn't mind them. And above all, you mustn't mind Trent. He does his thinking with his emotions, like most men. But don't keep too much to yourself. It's not good in this country. Work hard—that's always a relief. And come see me. Mind, I mean that. Come up to the bungalow, and we'll have a drink and dinner." She waved. "*Adios*, and the best of luck."

He stood looking after her until the launch rounded a bend, then he turned up the muddy trail toward camp. Wearily he straightened his shoulders. *Best of luck*. He'd need it.

Inside Peters' bunkhouse, Feagan was packing a crate of office equipment. He listened in glowering silence while Danny told him what O'Hearn had said of Peters' chance for life, then for a full minute he cursed steadily.

"Soon as I heard, I went lookin' for the bird who fired that shot, but he was long gone in the jungle. The boys wanted to mop up the whole town. But what good would it do? It wouldn't help the boss."

Danny sank down on a bench. "No, it wouldn't help the boss." He looked drearily about him. "What are you packing for?"

"We're pulling out, ain't we?"

"No. We're going to finish the job."

"Without Peters?" Feagan eyed him in blank amazement. "You're crazier than I thought. Look"—he came closer—"how much straight talk can you take?"

"All you can give—and don't bother pulling your punches."

"Well, then, get this. You might be a swell engineer —I wouldn't know—but all you savvy about mahogany you could put in a flea's eye. You haven't a Chinaman's chance to take Rod Peters' place. This job was tough going for the boss, and for you it's just not in the cards. Every man here knows we're operating on a shoestring, but Peters held them together because they knew what kind of stuff he's made of. They had faith in him, but they haven't in you, and you can't bluff 'em."

Feagan stopped. "Is this too raw for you to swallow?"

Danny shook his head. "I check with every word."

"Okay. In that case, you'll save money by paying the men off and calling it a day."

"That wasn't Rod's idea. But then he didn't expect you to quit when he needed you most."

Feagan's face reddened. "I can't take Rod Peters' place—neither can you. What do I know about road and bridge building?"

"What do I know about mahogany?" Danny asked quietly. "Look, Feagan—neither of us can take Rod's place, but maybe we can together. I'll build your bridges and lay out your roads—I'll even make a stab at keeping the pay rolls and books. But you'll have to log the mahogany and build the booms. It's either that, or we're all sunk, and every cent of Rod's money sinks with us."

Danny motioned toward the camp. "Most of those men out there have worked for Rod a long time—just like you. We can't turn them loose. Where would they go? Feagan, whether Rod lives or dies, you're not going to feel so good if you walk out now. It never occurred to him that you wouldn't stay on and help. All I want is a chance."

Feagan paced the length of the bunkhouse. Once he made as if to speak, but instead he stood flexing the huge muscles of his tattooed arms. At last he scowled across the room at Danny and, lifting the adding machine from its crate, slammed it back on Peters' desk. "I'll string along." He looked up fiercely. "But we're a couple of nuts."

"That's swell—"

Feagan stopped him short. "Don't get me wrong. I'm doin' this for just one reason—Rod Peters."

"We'll shake on that, if you don't mind."

Those next two weeks were a nightmare. Not an hour passed that Danny did not realize he was on very strict probation before judges he could neither bluff nor coerce —his own men. Five of them quit at once rather than work for a man who knew so little of mahogany, and when word reached Bajo that the young engineer Gayforth was taking Peters' place, the news was received with noisy derision.

The days themselves seemed endless. By dawn he was out with Feagan, locating the main truck roads that would lead into the heart of the mahogany groves. All day he superintended the grading and levelling, and at night, over a carbide lamp, he sketched the control maps from his survey notes. He worked harder than any of his men, and by midnight, dog-tired, he would throw himself into his hammock too fagged for sleep, smelling the musty breath of the river, listening to the drone of mosquitoes outside the screen. Often, kicking aside the light sheet, he lay naked and wet with perspiration until dawn brought the cool sea breeze; then, pulling on his still damp clothes, he would head for the woods again.

Using the main camp as a base, they divided up the best of the mahogany country into square-mile blocks, bisecting each block with a central truck road, so that all logs would be taken out by the shortest possible route. Not until the blocks were established could the mahogany hunters begin their work of locating and marking all the mature mahogany trees that were to be cut.

These hunters were experts, trained by long years of work in the woods, and on their vigilance and judgment rested all the difference between success and failure. Their search, to be thorough, required a whole system of trails, all of them co-ordinated with the truck roads in order to make the timber most accessible.

To Danny the jungle itself became a living antagonist, where mile after mile of lofty, buttressed trees and giant palms looked down with a kind of cold malevolence, dwarfing his efforts, resisting every attempt to invade those century-old fastnesses. Yet he was not insensible to

the mystery and attraction of a world of eerie green, where feathery ferns grew, varying from an inch to thirty feet in height, and fleshy, lopsided begonias thrust their roots upward out of the soil like huge serpents in mortal agony.

The rains had filled every concavity in the earth with green ooze, teeming with a million forms of life, gleaming with a faint fluorescence when night came; and often, going down to the river bank, Danny would play the light of his torch out over the waters, until dozens of pairs of little ruby-coloured eyes came nearer, and great clumsy crocodiles clambered up the bank toward the strange light that attracted them.

As soon as the rains slackened, Danny began the main logging road up Balsa Creek, while Feagan set his men clearing great patches of jungle to establish landings along the river, where the logs were to be held, and later gathered in booms for transport downstream.

From the first Feagan flatly refused to have anything to do with the accounts, so Danny took over the pay roll. The first night he looked at Peters' scrawled memoranda and the company's bank books, he called Feagan in.

"How did Peters arrange to pay the men?" he asked.

"He keeps the money in the bank up at the capital. Every month he sends two men with an order, and they bring back the cash."

"It doesn't sound like a very safe way to handle money."

"It's safer than keeping a bunch of dough down here."

Danny closed the bank book with a sigh. "I'd say there isn't a very big bunch of dough to keep."

Before the week was over, trouble broke out in Bajo. The mahogany men and Mellett's miners had never been very friendly, and on the day Feagan sent two trucks down to the warehouse for supplies, a dozen miners, led by Big Pete, their foreman, blocked them in the narrow street. A fight started and, drawing recruits from the cantinas, developed into a sizeable brawl. Three of Feagan's crew were badly beaten, and there was talk of reprisal.

Danny saw that the men were getting more restless,

more irritable, and he knew that the chief reason was their lack of confidence in his leadership.

But there were other reasons. Two of the trucks stripped their gears, and Feagan announced that both of them had been tampered with. Fire starting in the commissary was extinguished before it did any appreciable damage, but Danny found smouldering oil-soaked waste stuffed beneath the flooring. And that afternoon he and Feagan held a council of war.

"They're starting to put the heat on." The woods boss's temper was wearing thin.

"Who are 'they'?"

"Starling and Mellett—and maybe that little rat Bardi. But our main trouble all heads up with Starling and his smoothie daughter."

"That's what Andra Mellett says."

"I don't have to quote any women," Feagan snapped. "All I say is Faith Starling stands by her old man. Maybe that's natural. Everybody in Bajo knows how Starling feels about us, and that ain't helpin'."

Danny was not convinced. "Starling's a tough customer, but I have a hunch he does his work in the open."

"Yeah? Well, one way or another, what we need is to find out just where we stand. We oughta have a showdown."

For a time Danny sat looking straight before him, then he rose. "I think," he said, "I'll go see Doctor Starling."

CHAPTER EIGHT

AT THAT particular moment Anthony Starling was in one of his fine rages. Trent Mellett had brought him news, and the effect was such that even Faith, accustomed to her father's unpredictable passions, sat looking at him with apprehensive eyes.

"Tell me that again!" Anthony roared across the library.

"Feagan's crew is building a bridge at the head of Balsa Creek," Mellett repeated. "They've started a logging

road up through the ruins of the old Mayan city. They've already scraped off parts of the mounds for surfacing, and moved the stones from one pyramid for bridge cribbing."

"You hear that?" Starling glared at Faith. "Damned ignorant destructive vandals!" His fist crashed down on the table. "I won't have it!"

Quietly Trent asked, "Why should you? We can get rid of them any time you want. Gayforth's men are fed up with him, and they're in bad at Bajo. It wouldn't take much to persuade the whole gang to pull out."

Starling's eyes grew attentive. "How?"

"My miners detest the mahogany men as much as you do. They've had trouble ever since they came, and it wouldn't take much urging to fix up a surprise visit to Gayforth's camp. But to do the job, we need more men. If your excavating crews and my boys joined together, we could run Gayforth out of the country in one clean sweep. We could pull down their camp, throw their junk into the river, and they'd never rebuild."

Faith was looking at Mellett as if he were a stranger. "Do you really mean what you're saying?" she asked.

In quick resentment at her tone, he whirled. "Why not? In heaven's name, let's be logical. Either we want Gayforth here or we don't. If we don't, the quickest way to get him out is the best way." He peered at her more closely. "Why all this sudden interest in Gayforth? You and Andra both. She can be as hard as nails, and now she talks about giving this upstart a chance."

Out of long, slanting eyes, Faith looked at him until he turned sulkily away, then to her father she said, "You wouldn't do anything like that? You couldn't!"

But Starling's lower lip was thrust out in the old danger signal. "I could and I would. As far as I'm concerned, one Maya carving is worth more than that redheaded nincompoop's life." He regarded Trent thoughtfully. "If I let you have my boys to help you, are you sure you could run him out?"

"Easily. There might not even be a fight. Gayforth isn't a fighter, and his men won't defend a cause they know is lost already."

Faith did not speak. She was face to face with her father's colossal self-centredness. It was useless to plead with him—he couldn't be reached. He was living in a world that had ceased to exist a thousand years ago. But there was open anger in her eyes as she turned again to Mellett. "This is contemptible!"

"Your father—"

She cut him off. "Trent, that's not good enough. You aren't doing this for Father. You want to get Danny Gayforth out of here even more than he does." She appealed directly to Starling. "Father, if I keep Gayforth from building the road up Balsa Creek, will you promise to give up this cowardly scheme?"

"You can't ever persuade him—"

"That's not what I'm asking you. If I keep him away from Balsa Creek, will you let Danny Gayforth go on with his work?"

Starling thrust out his lip still farther.

"If you don't," she persisted, "it's just cold, deliberate persecution."

"And what if—"

"Just this." There was a new tone in her voice. "If you lend your help to wreck that camp, I warn you I'll have no more to do with your excavations. I'd be ashamed to."

Starling squirmed. He thought of the files of notes, memoranda, and card-indexed notations Faith had built up for him and he drew a deep breath.

"Damn it all!" He reared his great chest for a new assault, then looked at her and promptly deflated. "Have it your own wrongheaded way. But it's your responsibility to see that there's no more work up Balsa Creek. And next time, don't lose your temper when you talk to your father."

Frowning, Trent watched them, then at the sound of a motor, he glanced out over the lagoon and barked a short laugh of irritation. "Here's your protege." He walked to the door. "If you don't mind, I'll leave before the happy reunion."

Gayforth's launch had already put in at the dock when

Faith cautioned her father for the last time. "Remember, now—"

"Oh, I'll go easy." Starling cleared his throat. "Just let me get at this in my own way."

"Then try to be nice to him."

He began polishing his glasses. "Don't rush me. I'll be a damned dove, olive branch and all. But remember, no road up Balsa Creek."

Still fearing the worst, she opened the door for Danny.

"It's good to see you—" she began, but forgetful of his promise Starling charged forward.

"Not to me it isn't. I haven't had a peaceful night since Peters or you got here."

Surprised at the sudden onslaught, Danny looked up, and Anthony Starling plunged on.

"Do you happen to know where that tattooed gorilla, Feagan, is working?"

"At the head of Balsa Creek, on our main road."

"Not while I'm alive it isn't your main road." By this time Anthony's voice could easily be heard down at the dock. "You can't bring your termites on that land."

For an instant a wave of doubt surged over Danny. He knew the line between Peters' land and Anthony's lay somewhere up Balsa Creek—could Peters have been careless with his surveys? "I've been over the maps," he answered slowly. "Rod Peters located the road himself."

"Did he? Well, he located it on ruins I'm not going to have destroyed. I'll give you twenty-four hours to take the cribbing from that bridge and pull out."

"I can't do that, Doctor Starling. I can't lose that much time and money."

"You can't!" Throwing aside all remnants of restraint, Anthony went forth to battle. "You calamitous—"

"Father!"

Like a subsiding geyser, Starling sputtered into silence, and Faith hurried to fill the breach.

"What Father really wants to say is that you're building the road through the heart of the old holy city. Your workmen may destroy priceless relics. Isn't there some other place the road could go?"

Danny shook his head. "If there were any other way,

I'd take it. I'd be glad to. But to change that road now would mean adding weeks to the job, and I simply haven't time. I'm driving my men harder than they've ever been driven and, according to Rod Peters' map, I'm sure I'm on my own land."

"Maps aren't to be trusted in this country." She stopped; she saw her father making ready for a fresh attack and, as if reaching a decision, said quickly, "Danny, there's only one way to find out. Let's survey the boundary together."

He looked at her sceptically. "Are you a surveyor?"

"Try me."

He hesitated. His visit wasn't going according to schedule. The showdown he had come for was farther away than ever—well, better to wait until he was clear about Balsa Creek.

"When do you want to survey the boundary?" he asked.

"To-morrow. Come down to breakfast. We'll get an early start."

Troubled, he walked down the path and, turning out upon the dock, heard a quiet, "Hello." Dabs was waiting for him there. "You're not mad at us, are you?" She fell into step beside him. "I heard Father fussing."

He laughed. "I'll never be mad at you, Dabs." His hand about her shoulder, he walked with her out along the dock.

"Trouble is"—she kept very close to him—"I never see you any more."

With a twinge of compassion he saw the loneliness in her eyes. "I'm an old hermit, Dabs—I'm either in the woods or at camp."

"Can I come up to your camp sometime?"

"Any time. I tell you what"—he unwound the painter of the launch—"you come up to camp and we'll have dinner together. Just us two." And seeing the child's face light, Danny felt a sudden tug at his own heart.

Chugging across the lagoon, he abruptly decided to stop off at the Mellett hacienda—he had put off his promised visit to Andra until now he realized he hadn't been near her since the first day she brought him up to camp.

He found her reading on the porch, a cigarette in her fingers, a tall whisky-soda beside her. She seemed unaffectedly glad to see him, and waving him to a chair put cigarettes before him, mixed a drink, then curled up on the couch.

"And now, Danny in the Lion's Den, explain these two weeks of neglect."

"Why the title?" he smiled.

"That was what you reminded me of when I first saw you down at Starlings'. Everyone was glowering at you, and you were glowering back. How have things been going?"

"Not good. For one thing, your brother's miners and my men are getting along like strange bulldogs."

She shook her head. "It's not the miners. Your real trouble isn't the miners. It's Anthony Starling."

"Part of my trouble is—I know. I'm having a row with him now about the boundary up Balsa Creek. Faith and I are going to survey it to-morrow."

At Faith's name, Andra's restless eyes stopped, but she only said, "You've been having a bad time, Danny. Tell me about it."

He found a relief in talking. Seated on that comfortable porch, cooled by the breeze, Danny sketched for her the happenings of the past two weeks—the trouble with his own men, the fights at Bajo, and now Anthony's accusation of trespass.

"It's funny," he said. "All Peters wanted was to make a place where he and the men who worked for him could live with some security and self-respect, and it's as if most people would rather not have that."

"Just what was Mr. Peters trying to do? I never knew. Bardi said he was a meddlesome reformer."

"Rod didn't want to reform anything. He only wanted to cut out the mahogany and clear the jungle for rubber plantations. Ten years ago nobody was interested, but now that the States are in such a jam over rubber, the government up at the capital is all for Rod's idea. provided he can prove it's practical."

Andra was looking at him with a new intentness. "Is the government really interested in this rubber business?"

"That's what they told Peters. This country ought to be a source of revenue and employment instead of a jungle good only for alligators and escaped convicts. They know that, and they agreed to let him have more land as soon as he proves it works."

Lighting another cigarette, Andra tapped with her fingers on one small foot. "You've given me an idea, Danny." Some inward excitation was burning in her eyes, but she only said, "We'll talk about it later. Meantime, I'll see that Trent soft-pedals those belligerent miners of his."

She reached out her empty glass. "Let's not talk any more about troubles. Make me another Scotch and soda, Danny."

Yes, it was pleasant being here. For the first time in weeks he was able to get away from himself and from the grind of work at camp.

"You talk about taking things easy"—he leaned back—"but I don't believe you could. Your eyes are always moving. And you're a chain-smoker."

"Don't scold me," she laughed. "But you're right. I'm not a very restful person. At home I was a hell-cat—still am." She gave one of her unexpected nods. "Everybody's a hellcat until they get what they want."

In sudden interest he leaned forward. "What is it you want, Andra?"

CHAPTER NINE

THE topaz eyes stopped with a suddenness that startled him; then she raised both arms above her head. "I want lots of things—a whole world of things."

"Tell me about you," he persisted. "Where do you come from, and how did you get down to this far-off corner of the world?"

"It's not much of a story."

"Tell me just the same."

So, as the dusk gathered, she began talking of her early days, spent in a little suburb just outside Boston, and, as

he listened he caught a sense of that ceaseless driving power within her that had coloured her life, and her brother's life as well.

"It was pretty bleak," she said. "I was undersized and not too husky, and I was always being bundled up and coddled when all I really wanted was to get away. I couldn't go coasting or skating in winter, or swimming in summer. You can't conceive how stuffy life can be unless you're the youngest child in one of those families with a dully respectable past and no future. For seventeen years I never did a thing I wanted. There wasn't a day I didn't solemnly swear I'd get out and go somewhere and really live, even if I had to commit murder.

"Trent wasn't as bad off as I was, and in a way I used Trent to get what I wanted—at least he says I did. But what could you do if you were a girl and wanted things that only men can have?" She smiled across the table. "You wouldn't know, being a man. Well, I got what I wanted through Trent.

"Ever since we were born we had heard about this mine down here. It belongs partly to the family, and from the time I was six never a day passed that I didn't dream that when Trent and I were old enough, he would come down here and take charge of the mine, and I'd keep house for him. That dream got to be more real to me than my own life. And I made it real for Trent too."

"How did you persuade your family?"

"I told them it was either that or I'd run away with a second cousin my parents hated."

"Were you in love with him?"

"Not a bit." Again that quick, vehement shake of the head. "I've never been in love. But I'd have married him just the same. I wouldn't have stayed married long—just used it as a door to freedom. When I held that over my family, they decided to let Trent and me come down here." She looked up at him. "That's the sort of person I am."

"You must have wanted to get away very badly."

"Everything I want in life I want badly. I'm like Faust—I'd make a compact with the devil any old time if he had something I'd set my heart on. That's why the

first morning I saw you I told you to go your own way in spite of anybody or anything. Life's only worth living when you get what you want."

He was conscious again of the fire and driving force beneath the pastel exterior. "We can't all do that," he objected.

"Then be one of those who can."

"Life has always seemed too pleasant to make a battle out of."

Sharply she asked, "Then why are you working night and day?"

"For Rod Peters."

"Don't. Think of yourself first." Unsmiling, she left her couch and stood very close to him. "I may have to take you in hand, Danny the Lion Tamer."

"You'll find me pretty hopeless material."

The dusk was deepening, and, rising, he picked up his hat. "Thanks for the talk and the drink."

"Thank me by coming back. Not many people like me, Danny, and I don't like many people. But I like you. And you really gave me an idea when you told me about Rod Peters. I may be able to help you."

He smiled. "I thought you only did things for yourself?"

"Oh, don't make any mistake. This is for myself—too."

In the Starling hacienda that evening, Anthony and O'Hearn sat over their sherry. Starling was winning at chess, and he hummed in high good humour, his stubby hands hovering above the pieces. O'Hearn seemed preoccupied. His cigar had gone out, and more than once his eyes rose from the board to watch Faith move about the room.

Starling picked up a knight and began humming louder.

"You are pleased at something, no?" the doctor asked.

Anthony chuckled. "Moderately. I'm making that insufferable mahogany hacker pull in his horns—or rather Faith is."

O'Hearn frowned. "I wish, Don Antonio, you would

give Gayforth a chance. He is having trouble enough. A man in your position can afford to be generous."

Anthony finished his sherry at one derisive gulp. "You know what you are, Doctor? You're a drooling sentimentalist. Why in God's name should I be annoyed by this abysmal twirp? Why should I stand for the destruction of treasures that can never be duplicated, just because of a hop-headed dreamer like Peters?" He held the sherry bottle up to the lamp. "These things are always empty," he grumbled and, clutching it by the neck, lumbered out of the room.

O'Hearn glanced at Faith with his deprecatory smile. "Now, in the quaint words of Senor Gayforth, I am in the doghouse, no? Tell me, does Gayforth really interfere with your father's work?"

Faith shook her head. "Not until he put the road up Balsa Creek." She struck a match and held it to the doctor's cigar. "Carlos, I believe Trent wants to get Danny out of this country even more than Father does."

"He might."

"But why?"

"You."

She gave an incredulous laugh, and O'Hearn went on. "The more I see Danny Gayforth, the better I like him. You like him too."

"Yes, of course. I feel terribly sorry for him."

"Is that why you are not happy to-night, *chica*?"

"Partly. Carlos!" she burst out, "he can't keep on fighting Father and Trent both—they'll break his heart."

"At his age the heart is not so easily broken."

"But if he fails"—she looked into O'Hearn's thoughtful face—"you know how men can go to pieces here."

"Men go to pieces everywhere, *chica*, but not until life defeats them." Hands clasped over his great paunch, O'Hearn seemed sunk in meditation. At last he said, "To-night I find you are troubled, and you are not often so. Why?"

"He's so alone! I want to help him if I can. I want to keep Father and Trent from ruining him, and I'm not sure I'm taking the best way. Danny Gayforth may hate me for what happens to-morrow."

Rising, O'Hearn laid both hands on the girl's shoulders. "I am very fond of you, Faith—you know that. I would not have you make the mistake of playing God."

"Playing God?"

"Yes. To interfere too much in anybody's life, even with the best intentions—that is playing God. So *cuidado.*" His hands dropped back, and he was smiling again when Anthony Starling came through the door, a full bottle of sherry in his hand.

Impatiently the archaeologist peered down at the chessboard. "Does it take you all evening to make a move, Carlos? Better get that silly queen out of harm's way."

Next morning Danny tied his mule outside the hacienda just as Faith began laying breakfast on the porch. He ran up the steps two at a time, and thrust a piece of paper into her hand.

"Read this!" The words came tumbling with excitement. "It's a cable from Rod. He's out of danger."

Even before she finished reading she caught the quick contagion of his happiness. "But this is grand, Danny."

"Grand? I could yell. I could hug you—I could even hug your father. You just don't know how I feel!"

"Yes I do. You look like a different person."

"I should." Danny laughed in sheer release. "That mule outside think's I'm crazy. I sang all the way down the trail." He tucked the cable in his pocket and sniffed the air. "Is that real bacon, by any miracle?"

"It's real bacon—so come and get it."

A gay breakfast. Freed from worry for the first time in weeks, Danny did most of the talking, while Faith kept his cup filled with coffee. Yet even as he talked he realized that only part of his elation came from the good news—to himself he admitted that the presence of this dark-haired girl with the quiet, slanting eyes had the effect of giving to each moment a special significance, a quality of importance.

In the middle of a sentence he stopped. "Why do I talk so much whenever I'm with you?" he asked. "Back at camp I'm a strong, silent man."

Faith buttered another piece of toast and laid it on his

plate. "Dabs says you're so easy to entertain—she never has to say a word." She walked to a mirror, and, winding her thick braids close about her head, bound them in a bright-coloured handkerchief.

Over his cigarette he watched her. She was wearing the native *huipil,* brief cotton shorts, and a sturdy pair of high-topped moccasins.

"You look like a Maya Indian," he said, "only lovelier. No Indian ever had legs like that."

She wrinkled her nose in the mirror.

Ten minutes later they were in the saddle, followed by three of Starling's Indians, carrying machetes and a light mountain transit that Danny examined with professional approval.

"I haven't surveyed with one of these babies in a long time. Do you mean to say you can run a transit?"

She laughed. "Watch me, I've made location maps for every ruin in Father's books."

The jungle was still dripping with the night's rain, and as they rode Faith pointed out to him many of the tree species that made up the jungle—the broad-leaved water tree that guides the lost traveller to streams; the giant *zapote,* whose eternal wood exists still undecayed and undamaged in Mayan temples a thousand years old. She showed him *mata palo,* the killer fig, that fastens about a tree and slowly strangles the life from it, but where the river joined the lagoon they stopped before a limestone ledge, and Faith pointed to a cross chiselled in the rock.

"Ever seen this?" she asked.

He nodded. "Rod Peters showed it to me. It marks the corner between his land and yours. The boundary goes straight north from here three miles. Right?"

"Right."

"Then if we run due north we'll see whether my road is on your father's land. If I'm right and your father's wrong, I'm coming back to dinner."

She did not answer, but setting up the transit, released the compass and waited until the quivering needle came to rest; with a practised hand she adjusted the telescope and motioned Danny to look through.

"There's a tree right on line at the top of the ridge," he said. "We can make it our next setup."

But she did not move.

"Well, do we start?" he asked.

Still she hesitated. "Danny"—she looked earnestly up at him—"can't we drop this hair-splitting over boundary lines? Those ruins are terribly important to Father, and I'd like so much for you two to be friends."

"You mean you want me just to junk that road after all the work I've done?"

"It would be a generous thing to do. In this country we all need friends—you could make a friend of Father, and I can help you relocate the road. It would make things easier for all of us."

Grimly Danny recalled Andra's warning. Faith Starling was her father's daughter first and last. What difference to her how much time he lost if a few mouldering ruins were undisturbed? His face hardened. "We don't need a transit if all you want is to talk me out of this road."

He expected a quick denial, but instead she spoke a word to the Indians, and started up the long slope. The survey had begun.

CHAPTER TEN

HARD, hot going. For two hours they followed the compass needle due north, speaking seldom except to check the bearing at each new setup.

Once the line led them through a shallow swamp, and, taking off her shoes, Faith rolled her shorts higher and waded on ahead, slender legs begrimed with mud and glistening with water, while Danny watched her with reluctant admiration. Yes, she was like an Indian—wholly at home in the jungle, moving silently and sure, with a long, easy stride that never tired.

Up on higher ground, the compass line took them among dotted Mayan ruins, great shapeless mounds of earth, almost indistinguishable beneath the debris of a

dozen centuries. On many of the mounds, huge mahoganies and cedars grew, their roots clutching the broken masonry, living symbols of the jungle reclaiming its own. A hushed, shadowy place, and, stopping for a smoke, Danny looked curiously about him.

"Is this the ancient city?" he asked.

"The lower part of it."

"And people once lived here?"

"Thousands of them. Eight hundred years ago this was one of the crowded places of the world. People worked and lived out their lives here, and built temples to their gods. Then suddenly all life stopped."

"Why?"

"No one knows. Father and the Smithsonian archaeologists have had a ten-year battle over that. Some say the climate changed. Some say plague drove them away. Father thinks the soil wore out after centuries of cultivation. But it's all hazy."

"Like our boundaries." Danny moved forward. "Well, in the next hour we'll know what's what."

And an hour later, at the head of Balsa Creek, he looked through the transit, then turned to Faith with a crooked smile. "You're right and I'm wrong." His voice sounded suddenly weary. "The road's a hundred yards on your father's side of the line. Old Rod must have gone haywire when he located it." In sudden dejection he sat down on a log. "Weeks of work shot to pieces, and now I've got to find another place for the road."

She sat down beside him. "That won't be so hard. You can build it up the other fork of Balsa Creek."

"That's on your father's land too."

"But you won't strike any ruins there. I'll get him to let you use it. I'll help you survey it, if you want."

Raising his head, he studied her. "I can't make you out. At times you're as tough a customer as your dad—then all at once you—"

"Get human," she finished his sentence for him. "May I have a cigarette?"

Down by the trail where they left their horses, they found Trent waiting. He glanced at Danny with eyes that

were coldly amused. "Andra told me you were looking over the boundary. What did you find?"

"I was wrong," Danny answered shortly. Still puzzled by the results of the survey, Danny felt he could do without Trent's air of patronage that morning. "What's the best way back?" he asked Faith.

"I'll take you a short cut over your own land."

Riding ahead, she led the two men up a side trail, and out through long, rolling hummocks of grassland and gnarled bush—a land of limestone outcrops, with soil too shallow and sterile for high forest.

Danny looked about him. "This must be the country Feagan was talking of. He wants to put a camp in here and use an underground stream for the water supply."

Faith pointed ahead. "He meant the Cave of the Bats. It's just beyond here. Want to see it?"

"I'd like to. Feagan says it's a spooky place."

But at first sight it looked like a low hill, no different from the others; then, coming closer, Danny saw the narrow entrance, choked with brush. Faith took a searchlight from her saddle pocket.

"It's tight going at first." She laughed as the three Indians drew back. "You can never get the Mayas in here."

"Why not?"

"Listen."

From inside the black entrance Danny heard what sounded like the high, thin chirping of a thousand birds.

"Bats?" he asked.

"The cave is full of them. We've disturbed their rest. But that wasn't what I meant. Listen again."

This time he heard it—a dull, deep orchestration that rose and fell but never ended.

"That's why the Indians won't go near here. It's the sound of rushing underground water. The Mayas have an old legend about it. Come."

Taking a flashlight from his own pocket, Danny followed, and behind him, Trent. For a hundred feet they crawled on hands and knees through a damp, musty tunnel, scarcely high enough to admit them; then it widened until they could stand upright, and in the beam

of his searchlight Danny saw they were in a large, semi-circular cave, its fluted walls arching high above them. Almost at his feet, reaching across to the opposite wall, a black stream of water surged, moving swiftly from under the rock ledge to the left and disappearing beneath the limestone wall to the right.

Picking up a twig, Trent threw it into the water. As if a hand had reached up, it was ripped down into the blackness.

"There's a current for you," he said. "The water level varies by several feet. Probably depends on the tides."

Kneeling, Danny held his flashlight below the surface of the water. It gleamed with a green, unreal luminosity. "Rock bottom, and good clear water," he commented. "Feagan won't have to worry about his water supply here."

"You'll ruin your flashlight," Faith protested.

"It's waterproof and shockproof." He raised a wet hand to his lips. "Fresh water. I was afraid it might be brackish."

A bat whirred by, so close Danny jerked his head aside, and he threw the shaft of his searchlight up at the vaulted roof. "Lord," he gasped. "I don't blame your Indians!"

Literally hundreds of bats—every square foot of surface swarmed with them, hanging head downward, their eyes unutterably evil, glowing with garnet fire. Beneath the light they grew restless, and dozens were flying already about the cave, some of them leaving by the narrow tunnel for the outer air.

Once more Danny dodged. "Any time you want to go. I've seen plenty."

Faith laughed, but Trent's eyes were fixed on a vertical fissure across the pool, and leaning forward, he took the searchlight from Faith's hand. "I'd give a lot to get closer to that crack over there."

"Why?"

"It's the first time I've ever seen it above the water level, and it looks like the same ore-bearing formation we have in our mine. He turned to Danny. "Do you

suppose we could hang on to each other's hands and work our way across?"

Danny shook his head. "Not for me. That current would sweep you under the rock in just about two seconds."

"Spoken like a true adventurer." Trent laughed in the way Danny didn't like.

But Faith interposed. "Danny's right. It wouldn't be good sense."

Trent's eyes were growing stubborn. "It isn't good sense to pass up a chance like this. I've never seen the water so low." He began unlacing his boots.

"Trent"—anxiously she bent over him—"please don't try it by yourself."

"Looks as if I'll have to." Once more Trent smiled derisively at Danny. "I don't hear any loud clamour of volunteers."

Danny felt his anger mounting. "If I wanted to get over there so bad, I'd take some of those balsa logs outside and lash a raft together."

"Or build a suspension bridge." Trent dropped his feet into the stream. "You'll live to scratch many grey hairs, Bub."

Close to the bank the water was only waist deep, and gingerly Trent took a step forward, then staggered as the full force of the current struck him.

"Trent! Please!" In sudden dismay Faith called out, but Trent laughed again.

"Watch this, old lady." Facing outward, holding the rocky ledge with both hands, he gathered his feet beneath him until his knees were doubled; then with a swift thrust he straightened and shot across the pool. The current swerved him, but his impetus carried him safely over, and, grasping the fissure, he turned and with a mock bow of triumph, called, "All done by mirrors."

With absorbed interest he examined the rubble that had settled between the rocks, then looked back at Danny. "Would it be too dangerous for you to catch some of these specimens? I want to get them analysed."

Tight-lipped and silently resentful, Danny caught the fragments Trent threw him.

"Now." Still holding to the fissure, Mellett turned. "Now for the daredevil leap to safety."

Both flashlights were on him as he faced in their direction, and after a moment Danny saw him frown.

"It shelves back so steep on this side there's nothing to push against." Trent's voice had lost its easy confidence. "Throw your lights on the rock beside me—maybe I can pull myself around."

But the limestone gleamed like glass, without the least handhold—getting back across that rushing torrent was not to be so simple.

"Wait a minute." Danny thrust the searchlight into his pocket and slipped off his belt. Very carefully he let himself over the side, one hand still holding the bank, then took a step forward, feeling his way out over the slime-smooth bottom. Close above him he heard Faith's voice.

"Shall I hold you by the shoulders?"

"Just keep the light on Mellett." He moved still farther out. The bottom was dropping steeply now; the water, rising about his waist, tugged at him like a live thing, almost lifting him bodily. He steadied himself on that precarious footing and called to Trent, "Catch this."

Holding tight to the buckle, he flicked the other end of the belt outward, and Trent caught it in his left hand. Danny braced himself. "Shove as hard as you can, and hang on to the belt. I'll pull you in." He watched Trent gather himself for the plunge, then heard him say, between tight teeth, "Here we come."

Almost he succeeded. Danny saw the water swirl about Mellett's shoulders and felt the sharp tug on the belt. Pulling with all his might, he leaned backwards until his tensed muscles knotted, but a force stronger than Danny's held Trent like a vice. Once more, with every ounce of power that was in him, Danny pulled. Desperately he tried to reach the bank, his foot slipped, and his fingers lost their hold. Faith's hands closed about his shoulder,

held for a frantic second, then ripped loose, and now the current had him.

With all his strength he kicked out, but the high-topped riding boots pulled him down. Twice in the darkness he whirled. A kick brought him almost to the surface, but now as if seized by some giant suction, he felt himself dragged down beneath the rock. Black water closed above his head.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Down beneath swirling waters, bruised by rocky walls too smooth to grasp, Danny felt himself swept into blackness.

Through a narrow passage the current flung him, spinning him over and over, until all sense of direction was lost, and consciousness itself had narrowed to a compelling need for air. Once his hand struck an outstretched arm, and he knew it was Trent Mellett, but now his only thought was relief for those aching lungs. Ears pounding, heart racing, he kicked upward in final desperation. Dimly he felt the clutch of the current slacken, felt the pressure on his lungs relax, then the waters parted above his head and he gained the blessed gift of air.

Gasping, he opened his eyes. Black as night about him. He was standing up to his neck in water, the gritty feel of broken rock beneath his feet, but the current was barely perceptible. Steadying himself, he began groping, then remembering the flashlight in his pocket, switched it on.

An enormous limestone cavern towered above him, half a hundred feet in height, stretching back into a world of shadows. Out over the surface of the water he moved his light; then almost at once he found what he was seeking—Mellett, struggling feebly not a dozen feet away.

Splashing through the water, Danny seized him by the shoulder and, wading back, laid him at full length on a rock ledge. The eyes were closed, the skin above one

temple bruised and broken, but he was breathing steadily and deeply.

Flashing on his light again, Danny climbed out, then with a gasp he barely held himself from slipping back into the pool.

On the rock above, scarcely a foot away, a human skull looked down with hollow eyes. Slowly Danny moved the light—not one, but a score of skulls was holding eternal vigil on that limestone ledge. Something incredibly malign about those ghostly sentinels drew Danny nearer, and he saw that the teeth had been filed to points and inlaid with a substance that gleamed like gold.

Pulling himself upright, he took a single step forward, and in blank amazement halted—he was standing before the altar of an underground temple. Back as far as the living rock itself, great stone stairways rose, tier after tier, elaborately carved with plumed serpents, their mouths hideous with curling fangs and long, lolling tongues, still bearing traces of vermilion paint. On the altar stood three red polished bowls, and draped across both sides were two brilliantly coloured priest robes, intricately fashioned of minute shells.

And over everything—altar, stairway, even the skulls—lay a film of fine grey dust, the slow accumulation of powdered limestone.

A wave of hope surged up within Danny—if he was in a Mayan temple, somewhere must be an outlet. Flashlight in hand, he began feverishly exploring every square foot of the stony surface, and at the base of the stairway he found it—an ancient entrance, walled in by rock, and sealed with heavy cement.

No hope there—he should have known it before. Across the centuries no living thing had disturbed that film of powdery dust, no trace of even bat or lizard in this silent, breathless place. The mouldy smell of the tomb hung in the air. They were shut off from the world.

Sick at heart, he climbed back to the ledge and sat beside the unconscious body of Trent, while above him the line of skulls grinned down in sinister delight. Leaden minutes passed, then hearing a low sigh, he saw Mellett

open his eyes. Mumbling, Trent moved his head from side to side and sat up.

"Was I knocked out?" The voice was very weak.

"Yes."

"Where are we?" He peered uncertainly down over the pool and shuddered. "Don't bother—I remember." A long silence, then, "I suppose there's no way out?"

"None. I just looked."

Silence again. Mellett drew a deep breath. "My damned stubbornness let you in for this. I'm sorry."

"Forget it." Danny switched off the light—no use running the battery down.

Mellet's voice came through the darkness. "This water must go out somewhere. Do you think we'd have a chance downstream?"

"About one in a million."

"Anything's better than starving here."

Danny did not answer. "Have you a gun?" he asked.

He heard Mellett's quick gasp. "You wouldn't—!"

"Don't be a fool. We might make Faith hear us."

"She can't hear through solid rock."

"This rock isn't solid. It's full of fissures." Danny switched on the light, and from a shoulder holster Mellett handed him his automatic. Removing the magazine, Danny drained out the water while Mellett watched him.

"Even if Faith hears you, what can she do?" Hunching forward, Trent laid his face in his hands, a symbol of dejection far different from the arrogant, self-assured Mellett of a few short moments before.

Three times Danny fired. Within that closed space a cannonade of echoes rattled back among unseen crevices, and the silence that followed was deeper than ever. Mellett did not even raise his head.

So for a time they sat in brooding silence, while Danny made and discarded a dozen plans. Each time his mind went back to the stream—hopeless to try swimming against it, and only the flimsiest of chances it would take them out to safety below. Yet even that might be better—to get it over quickly, one way or the other, rather than go mad in a place where even hope had died.

Trent was breathing faster, and Danny wondered how long the air would support them.

"Do you mind switching on the light?" The pitch of Mellet's voice had risen. "This damned darkness is getting me."

Danny set the searchlight down between them, its white glare tracing a vague circle out over the pool. It would burn for an hour or two, and after that—after that, Danny didn't care to think. He saw Trent raise his head.

"Say something, can't you, for God's sake?" The voice was perilously near the cracking point.

Quietly Danny began to talk as one might talk to a frightened child. Help was bound to come . . . Faith would see to that . . . they'd start dynamiting from outside . . . all they had to do was wait. Even as he talked, he wondered how much Trent believed, or if he even heard. His own voice sounded strangely alien in this sunless tomb. His lips had gone stiff and dry, yet he talked on.

But now he stopped—out where the water came boiling down from above, something was bobbing in the current. It disappeared, rose again, and this time Danny jumped down from the ledge. A step forward, waist-deep in water, and his cry brought Mellett's head up with a jerk. A piece of wood floated there, held fast by a rope, and the rope led back into the tunnel. Wading out, Danny pulled it to him.

"It's Faith's saddle rope!" he shouted.

The wet strands tightened beneath his fingers, and he saw it straighten. Danny's hands were trembling; his voice could not keep steady. "She floated this down for us to pull ourselves out."

Wading beside him, Mellett clutched hungrily at the rope, then in panicky defiance asked, "Who goes first?"

"You go." It took courage to say those two words; if there was more than one channel to that underground stream, the rope might never come back.

Danny made a quick noose. "Tie it around your waist, in case you lose your grip. You'll have to go up hand over hand. Faith can't pull you against this current.

Take a couple of deep breaths when you get to the entrance. I'll hold the light." Danny's heart was thumping wilder than ever—it was hard to talk, harder to breathe.

But Mellett stood unmoving, eyes fixed on the pool, and roughly Danny shook him, then shoved him forward. "Go on, get started!" Danny shouted to waken him from that lethargy.

Slowly Mellett waded out, then as the water deepened, he began swimming along the rope. At the entrance he stopped. Danny saw him grasp the rope with both hands, inhale deeply, and in another second he had disappeared. Danny was alone.

Waist deep in the pool, eyes fixed on that circle of churning water, he waited. Once the flashlight flickered and a new fear assailed him—if he should be left in darkness, unable to see the rope when it returned!

Minutes passed. He was getting numb beneath the waist, but still he stood there, feeling horribly alone, and with each second hope ebbed. Again the flashlight flickered, then—his cry brought the echoes rattling back—just ahead of him that piece of wood was bobbing. With cold, clumsy fingers he knotted the rope about his waist, then waited, gathering his strength, forcing himself to be calm. For the last time he swung his light back among the shadows; the great plumed serpents were staring at him out of jadeite eyes! the row of skulls watched incuriously from their eternal vigil. The rope tugged like a live thing beneath his hand.

Time to go. Filling his lungs with air, he dived steeply, both hands on the rope; then, as the suction caught him, began pulling. Almost at once he was within the tunnel, swirled and buffeted by the current. Rocks scraped his hands and face, the roar of waters pounded in his ears, but foot by foot he fought his way. Once the rope slipped; he tightened his grasp with frantic strength. Hand over hand—hand over hand—he had lost all count of time. His lungs were aching, the blood throbbed in his throat. Mustn't think about breathing. Just hand over hand—that was the thing to think of.

Endless. He began counting each new hold on the

rope; then without warning his feet touched bottom, and he stood coughing the water from his lungs. He heard his name and, opening his dripping eyes, saw Faith's frightened face close to his own.

With both hands she was holding him, and weakly he laid his head down on the rock, while tremor after tremor racked him, and it was long minutes before he could crawl out upon the floor of the cave.

"How do you feel?" She wiped a trickle of blood from his forehead.

He tried to smile. "I could be awful sick if I wanted."

Behind him Mellett stumbled to his feet. "For God's sake, let's get out of this—out where there's air."

And nothing in life ever seemed so welcome to Danny as that first warmth of sunshine on his face, and the soft touch of wind.

Utterly spent, Mellett threw himself at full length on the ground, then he raised himself on one elbow. "I'll feel that water sucking me down as long as I live." His eyes closed and opened. "I'd still be there if it weren't for you, Faith—" As if against an inner resistance, he added, "and Gayforth." He took a long, shuddering breath, then, to Faith, "What made you think to float that rope down?"

"I heard your shots. It was the only chance." She shivered. "What did it look like there? Another cavern?"

"I was too dizzy to see, and Gayforth was a damned miser with his light." Trent glanced over at Danny. "Just another limestone cave, wasn't it?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

"It was a great—" Danny stopped. If Feagan needed this place for a future camp site, to tell them of the temple meant more trouble with Starling. He would want to excavate—and Danny had enough of Starling and his excavations. So he only answered. "Yes, it was a big limestone chamber. A nice, cosy place to go mad in."

With a shadow of a smile he looked toward Trent. "We left your gun in there—want it?"

Mellett was still white. "There's nothing in the world would get me back there again." He bit his lip and turned his face away.

They seldom spoke of that day—the memory was too unwelcome. But its effect on Faith and Danny was to draw them closer in the fraternity of comrades who had shared danger together.

There were still stronger bonds. Young, about the same age, they possessed the same keen zest for living in a land where each day brought a new mood. To Danny the very contrasts of that life between sea and jungle held an element of strangeness that never passed, and of all this Faith had become an integral part. She was part of its exotic richness and its unrestricted freedom. She was more varied, more unexpected, than any girl he had ever known.

She piqued him too. More than once he rebelled at the knowledge that she affected him so strongly, bringing him a growing sense of awareness of her presence a provocation to outdo himself, while she herself remained so coolly, so irritably insensible. And there were times when she made him feel very young, as she studied him with those long, slanting eyes of hers. He wondered if she had ever been in love. Once he asked her.

She laughed. "Of course. Twice—maybe three times."

"You mean you don't even remember?"

"Well, I don't go around memorising it."

"You're a cold, sexless cucumber," he told her with warmth.

Again she laughed. "That's what every man calls every woman who doesn't idolise him at first sight."

In the two weeks that followed, Danny saw her more often, for he was locating a road through the centre of Temple Island, just across the lagoon from the Starling hacienda. The island held a small but valuable stand of mature mahogany that could be logged at less expense than the forests up Lost River, and Feagan decided to make the Temple Island timber part of his first cargo. Here, at least, they were safe from difficulty with the archaeologist, for Starling had finished his excavations on the island years ago.

At the end of each day, Danny fell into the habit of stopping at the hacienda for Faith, and together they would swim as far as the bar, or, lying in the sun, he would watch her, looking lazily straight up into the sky, eyes half veiled by black lashes, arms cushioning her head, as unconscious of her sun-tanned body as the Indian woman in her father's hacienda.

But they were not many, those stolen hours with Faith. Danny was working harder than he had ever worked before, and he had troubles enough. He was behind on his road building, and Peters' bank account was shrinking alarmingly. But he possessed the one cardinal virtue of refusing to worry. He did everything he could to remedy a bad situation, and then dismissed it. Only in that way did he keep his sanity.

Meanwhile, Dabs was delighted that his work on Temple Island made it possible for her to see him more often. Each day she paddled across the lagoon to spend an hour with him, content to watch him with the adoration of childhood, and often, arriving at lunch time, she shared with him a basket of cookies from the kitchen.

Feagan viewed all this sardonically. "You go in for 'em young," he commented.

"No age seems to please you when it comes to women," Danny countered.

"Oh, I don't know. From eighty on they're not so tricky."

Those hours with Faith and Dabs were made more cloudless by Trent's absence at the capital, where he had gone to renew his mining licences. For Danny never felt at ease with Trent. Always there was the latent sting behind his words, the look that could never be wholly friendly, and all his too manifest possessiveness toward Faith.

Starling Danny seldom saw. The archaeologist was in one of his periods of vile temper that O'Hearn called his "between-books" mood.

"Then why doesn't he start another book?" Danny asked Faith.

"He says there's nothing new to write about. This morning he swore he'd never write again, then he snapped at Dabs when she agreed with him that he'd written enough. Someday he'll start another, and everything will be serene."

In one way only did Danny's association with Faith fall short of perfection—in spite of all her friendliness, he sensed a reticence, an intangible but ever-present wall that she had built between them. He never spoke of it until a night they went to dinner at Andra Mellett's.

Faith was wearing a long green evening gown that night, and about her neck hung a string of jadeite; her thick hair, so often braided with coloured ribbons in the Mayan fashion, had been drawn high upon her head.

"How many different people are you?" he asked as she steered the launch up the river. "Daytime you're Indian or mermaid. To-night you're so dressed up and dignified."

She laughed. "Which me do you like best?"

"Both—but I don't understand either of them."

He was suddenly earnest. "Faith, there's something in you that doesn't come out into the open. Part of you is here with me, and we have a grand time together, but there's another part of you that stays on guard and watches."

"Miss Jekyll and Senorita Hyde," she smiled, but he saw that her eyes were wary.

"It won't do, Faith. You're trying to stall. There's

something you won't tell me. What is it? Are you married to Trent?"

"Of all the idiotic questions!" she blazed.

"It's not so idiotic—he acts as if he had a ninety-nine-year option."

Her eyebrows drew together in the old danger signal of her father's.

"Mad?" he asked.

"Shouldn't I be? You're trying your best to make me so. Well, just for the record, I'm not married, and I'm not engaged, and I'm beginning to be bored with this catechism."

They were coming into the Mellett dock, and Danny cut off the motor. "I'm sorry." He lifted her from the launch. "Just the same, there *is* something you won't tell me, isn't there?"

She stood up beside him, her hand still in his. "Yes, there is." Her voice had taken on a new quietness. "And I hope you never find it out—*not ever.*"

But he did—that evening.

It was a small party. Dr. O'Hearn, enshrouded in cigar smoke and immaculate as always in a white alpaca suit, Alfredo Bardi, owner of the Cantina Venus, and Andra. Trent had not come back from the capital.

Perched up on the edge of the foothills, the Mellett bungalow was always pleasantly cool, and after dinner they danced on the verandah to the music of a short-wave radio and sat over liqueur and coffee, watching the distant sea.

Physically wearied with a long, hard day, Danny sank back in the deep-cushioned seat, only half-listening as O'Hearn told tales of early days along the coast. Opposite him were the two girls, and for the first time Danny realized how wholly different they were—different not only in feature and colouring and manner of speech, but basically different in their response to living.

Faith was smiling at something O'Hearn had said. Leaning back in the lounge, her face was in partial shadow, but beneath the brown translucence of her skin, Danny could trace the faint flush of coursing blood. The

full red lips were parted, the long eyes filled with interest. There was a vast repose about her, and a sense of depths untouched, and Danny asked himself if it was the mystery, the sense of the unknown, that made her so provokingly different.

"Miss Jekyll and Senorita Hyde," he remembered her saying, and he wondered if, after all these days, he knew her in any way that mattered. Perhaps knowing had nothing to do with it; he simply felt a warmth of exhilaration when he was with her—and an emptiness when he was not. It was a thought that brought him no comfort, and he looked at Andra.

Not the least resemblance there. Andra, with her finely chiselled face and bamboo-coloured hair, smoking incessantly, sat forward in her chair, as if on the point of rising. The topaz eyes kept moving from one person to the other, and beneath the long dress Danny could see her foot at its eternal tapping. "A dynamo in porcelain," Danny said to himself. Men would remember her anywhere.

Bardi never took his eyes from her. He had just mixed another Scotch and soda, and as he gave it to her, his finger curved in a furtive gesture of intimacy over the girl's wrist, and Danny saw a quick shadow of annoyance in her eyes.

With new interest Danny looked at Bardi. According to Peters and Feagan, this dark, wiry little person with too many gold teeth and too many rings was a power in Bajo. Born of Italian parents living in Central America, Alfredo Bardi had gone to New York in his teens to study law. Expelled from college in the heyday of prohibition, he had joined a bootlegger gang, and was beginning to achieve a small notoriety when the United States authorities deported him. Returning to Bajo, he was able to satisfy a long-held dream—to be the proprietor of a night club. The Cantina Venus was symbol of his success. As to his other activities, rumours varied. Smuggling was most often hinted. That would explain his suspicion and dislike of newcomers, Danny concluded, and it might also mean that part of his own difficulties could be traced back to Bardi.

Again Danny heard O'Hearn's voice. "Always," the doctor was saying, "always the days when one is young are best. But I think of the early days along this coast as a lost paradise. The jungle and the ocean gave us our food; we had our days of fiesta, we had a little music and a little love."

"Was Bajo as tough as it is now?" Danny asked.

"Bajo has always been turbulent—during your noble experiment, it did a thriving business in very bad rum."

Andra looked up. "The coast must have been a wild place in those early days. It wasn't even surveyed, was it, Don Carlos?" The question was directed at O'Hearn, but her eyes were on Faith.

"Surveyed? *Dios,* senorita! Who would run lines through these jungles? There were no mines to make land valuable. Nobody cared whose land was whose."

"Doctor Starling did," Andra reminded him. "When we came here, the first thing he gave Trent was a copy of his map, so that we would keep to our own side of the line. I studied that map religiously. I still have it."

She walked to the desk and pulled out a roll of dusty papers. "They always fascinate me—maps." Spreading one wide on the table, she called to Danny. "Have you ever seen this? It shows your boundaries."

Danny rose. He heard a faint intake of breath from Faith and saw Andra's eyes catch fire. "I never knew Doctor Starling had made a map," he said.

"Of course you did. Faith must have told you. Look—there's his boundary. And over here is ours."

But Danny was no longer listening. Bending over the map, he was tracing the line that ran due north to the head of Balsa Creek, and—he straightened with a jerk. Balsa Creek lay clearly within Peters' boundaries—the road he had relinquished to Starling was on his own property. For one ghastly second Danny stood there while the meaning of that survey flooded in on him; then in silent accusation his face turned toward Faith, and her eyes told him the answer—she had tricked him, deliberately tricked him to save her father's precious ruins.

From far away he heard Andra's voice. "You must have seen this map, Danny."

He moved across the porch, his head throbbing. "I don't think so," he answered. "But I wouldn't need a map—Faith keeps me straightened out on my boundaries."

Andra rolled it up. "I'm afraid I interrupted your story, Don Carlos."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BUT no one seemed to listen any more. The short-wave radio picked up a marimba programme from Guatemala City, and no one danced. Gaiety had gone, and a few minutes later Faith walked slowly across the porch to Andra.

"Your party has been a great success, Andra." Her dark eyes were smouldering.

Contentedly Andra smiled. "You must come again, dear—and bring Danny."

In an accusing silence Danny followed Faith down to the river and out over the dock, but as she lighted the lantern of the launch, she asked, "Shall I drop you at camp?"

"I'll walk." His voice, flat and toneless, brought the blood to her cheeks. "Too bad Andra stumbled on that map to-night."

"Stumble! She didn't stumble. She did it to show you I lied about that survey."

"So Andra knew it too? I suppose everybody knew it except me. What a laugh it must have given you and Trent!" His eyes passed over her, as if he saw her for the first time. "Faith is such a pretty name," he said. "Honest and straightforward."

She winced, but he went on. "I was dumb, wasn't I? I should have remembered it's not so hard to throw a compass needle out of line—a tack inside the case will do it. I just didn't happen to know you went in for such rotten cheap tricks." In quick, unhappy anger, he flared out at her. "You're all of a kind down here—a lot of petty crooks, capable of anything from lying about a boundary line to shooting Peters in the back."

"Listen, Danny—"

"Oh, stop it," he cut her off. "You got what you wanted. You put me in a hole because I didn't have the brains to know why you were peddling that girlish charm so lavishly."

Stung by his cold contempt, her hands clenched. "Don't you dare—!"

His laugh grated. "That line's played out too, Faith. Righteous indignation doesn't get you anywhere. Not now. You can tell your father and the rest of the pack that Little Rollo's eyes are open at last."

From that night on, with all the energy of every waking moment, Danny threw himself into the work, but the days that followed weren't particularly happy ones. He achieved a partial forgetfulness of Faith, but Feagan would not let him forget their growing difficulties. His chief worry was the dwindling reserve of funds. It was clear that if Peters failed to raise more money there would not be enough to meet the pay roll. Twice Danny cabled his pressing need to Peters, but the only reply was, "Hold everything. Doing my best."

And Bajo was growing more hostile. Seldom his men went down to the warehouse for supplies without a brawl. Trent's miners, under the leadership of their foreman, Big Pete, seemed always on the lookout for trouble, and added to this was the knowledge that, in spite of his best efforts and Feagan's, they were falling behind. The fever season was at hand, and they had cut barely half their quota of logs.

One thing that held them back was Feagan's persistence in following the old mahogany superstition of cutting only during a period five days before the full moon and fourteen days after. This was *costumbre*, and the custom was rigidly adhered to by every mahogany camp in Central America. Mahogany cut at any other time, they all said, was not durable. To make up for this delay, Danny tried shifting his men about, putting them alternately on road-building and cutting, but the axemen looked on themselves as specialists, and resented the more plebeian work of road construction.

Meanwhile, except for O'Hearn, Danny kept wholly to himself. Faith had hurt him far more deeply than he admitted, and even though his work on Temple Island took him by the Starling hacienda almost daily, he saw none of the family except Dabs. For Dabs refused to be ignored. If she knew of the break between Danny and Faith, she said nothing, and whenever she saw his launch cross the lagoon to Temple Island she would paddle over to be with him unless high winds kept her from venturing beyond the bar. At first there was a tentative quality in her visits, as if she was half afraid Danny might not want her, but she seemed content just to be with him, watching with terrified excitement the felling of some forest giant, or listening quietly while he and Feagan planned the next day's work. And during those days she brought him greater solace than he realized.

More than once Danny wondered if Faith knew where Dabs was spending her days, but he never mentioned Faith's name. Except once. And that was to Feagan, several days after Andra's party. Feagan had come up from making an inventory of the warehouses, and listened to Danny's story of Faith's deception in silence.

"You can't trust the best of 'em—if there are any," he said at last. "But I wouldn't have thought it of her. She's one person—" He shrugged. "Well, from now on you'll know how to take women in your stride."

"I don't expect to take them at all."

"You will, though. But you gotta be tough. When they start butterin' you up, discount it ninety per cent—maybe more. And even then you get rooked. No man's a match for a woman at any game. I knew a dame in Panama once—a young, innocent-lookin' broiler—" Apparently reconsidering, Feagan rolled a cigarette. "Well, it ain't like women are our only trouble—we're bein' robbed."

"Robbed?"

"That's the word. I been checkin' over things down at the warehouse this morning. We're shy a dozen cylinder heads, three drums of oil, and I don't know how much smaller stuff. I've been suspecting that."

"You mean things are being taken out of the warehouse?"

"They didn't walk away."

"What about the watchman?"

"Mebbe he doesn't watch enough. Or mebbe somebody tells him when to watch and when not to."

Danny swung around on his high drawing stool. "Let's get this straight, Feagan. Who hires the watchman?"

"The steamship company, through its agent—Bardi—but we pay half the buzzard's salary."

Danny drummed on the desk. To lose equipment was even more serious than the loss of money—it might cripple them. Frowning, he looked up. "Feagan, you and I better pay a visit to the warehouse."

"When?"

"Right now."

Feagan shook his head. "It's the worst night you could pick. To-day was payday at the mine. Trent's boys will be cuttin' it high, wide, and handsome."

Danny nodded. He knew that twice each month the miners descended in a body on Bajo for one riotous night that ended with empty pockets and aching heads at dawn. He knew too that nearly all the acts of violence in Bajo fell on nights of *pago*. "Just the same," he said, "let's go."

As they walked down the truck road, Danny asked, "What about Bardi? Where does he fit into the picture?"

"You got me. He's tied up with Trent by bein' agent of the steamship line that Trent's a director of. And besides that, he's got his hand in everything that goes on in Bajo. He's a smoothie."

An hour later they reached Bajo. Feagan's prophecies were fulfilled. The streets were thronged with noisy crowds, and from every saloon came the jangle of tinny pianos and marimbas. Above the din, a woman's voice shrilled a bawdy song of the Central American brothels, and at the farther end of the street Bardi's Cantina Venus blazed with lights. As they passed the first saloon, they heard the sound of shattered glass; a dog barked from an unseen alley; the air itself was hot and foul.

Danny smiled thinly. "I wish Anthony Starling would

come down some pay-nights—he might change his ideas about this lily-white oasis."

Across the road a group of miners, quarrelling among themselves, recognised Danny and Feagan, and jeered at them as they passed.

Hurrying down to the river, they came out upon the two warehouses—but no watchman. They made a complete circuit of the dock, knocking on the doors of both warehouses, and at the second Danny found a half-open window. So far as any watchman was concerned, the place was absolutely unguarded.

Angrily Danny turned away. "It's a wonder they haven't walked off with everything. Let's look up the watchman."

"That's easy. He'll be in Bardi's booze-hall."

They found him at the bar—a squat, heavy-shouldered fellow with blood-shot eyes and mottled skin that might have held the blood of a dozen races. Far gone in liquor, he recognised Feagan.

"How goes?" he called, proud of his colloquial English. "You come down to mak' whoopee, no?"

Danny walked forward. "Why aren't you at the warehouse?"

"This is *pago*, senor."

"*Pago* or no *pago*, you're paid to watch that warehouse."

Slowly the meaning of Danny's words seeped in on him. and with an outraged laugh he turned to the crowd. "You hear? I should be at the warehouse. All by myself I should stay at the warehouse on *pago*." He began shaking with drunken merriment.

Sudden quiet fell; men put down their glasses; an air of hushed expectancy held the room. Then Danny said, "You're fired."

"Fired? Me?" The bloodshot eyes were blazing. "You go tell my boss. Go tell Alfredo Bardi and see." Anger and alcohol and a knowledge that the crowd was watching lashed him to a rage. "Go on—Bardi is upstair'. And tak' from me these regards." He thrust a grimy paw in Gayforth's face.

A shout of laughter filled the room—then quickly

hushed. Danny's arm whipped up in a short arc; the watchman took two steps back and sat down on the floor.

Danny turned to Feagan. "Let's go up."

On the steps behind him he heard the Irishman's delighted chuckle. "Boy, oh boy, I believe you're startin' to get sore."

The room upstairs was large and furnished with a touch that Bajo fondly believed "moderne." A rhumba band played at the far end, and in the centre was a dimly lit dance floor. Ranged about the room were rows of curtained booths.

At the head of the stairs a waiter bowed. "A table, senores?"

Danny looked around. "Is Alfredo Bardi here?"

The man hesitated. "You have an appointment?"

"You bet we have." Feagan at his heels, Danny followed the waiter down a long line of tables.

Before a closed booth the waiter stopped. "You are sure of the appointment, senor?"

Danny flung open the curtain, then stepped back in surprise—from the table Andra Mellett was looking up at him. Opposite her, Alfredo Bardi sat; the table itself was littered with sheets of ledger paper.

Malevolently Bardi glared up, then swept the pages in a heap, while the terrified waiter babbled. "Senor Bardi, this man told me he has an appointment."

Bardi rose stiffly. "I have no appointment with you, senor."

"I want to see you."

"It can wait until to-morrow."

"No it can't. The watchman my company helps support is downstairs drunk, and I'm getting tired having the people of Bajo take me for a relief mission."

Bardi's frown deepened. "And for this you interrupt the lady and me?"

"Just exactly for this."

Tense and alert, the two men stood at angry gaze, then coolly Andra interrupted. "Danny's right, Alfredo. Trent has been losing no end of things from the warehouse." She gathered the pile of papers from the table

and gave them to Bardi with a little smile. "We are finished, aren't we?"

"Is this my dismissal, senorita?"

"Why don't you and Mr. Feagan agree on a new watchman? I want to talk with Mr. Gayforth."

Sulkily Bardi turned away, and Feagan grinned. "Nothing like the bum's rush for snappy action."

Danny had not stirred, and Andra reached out to him. "Sit down, Danny the Lion Tamer. Don't stand there like a human question mark. If you're wondering why I'm here, it's part of my job to have Bardi certify the pay roll when Trent's away." She turned to the waiter, still standing dejectedly by the entrance. "Bring a bottle of Vino Diamante and two glasses."

Danny sat down. "I'm sorry I barged in on you so—"

"You're not sorry. You still look like a thunderstorm —it's rather becoming." Lighting a cigarette, she gave it to him. "Maybe it was part of our sagas that we should meet here to-night." Her eyes were brighter than he had ever seen them, and some inner excitement had touched each pastel cheek a deeper pink. She leaned toward him in a slow scrutiny. "You know, you're changing, Danny."

"How?"

"You're hardening. Maybe what Faith did to you was good after all. You have it in you to go a long way."

Still angry at the warehouse episode, he said shortly, "This business of going a long way seems pretty important to you."

"Of course it does. And it should to you."

Knocking discreetly, the waiter placed a bottle of Spanish wine on the table, and Danny filled Andra's glass.

"Must we drink to going a long way?" he asked.

"Drink," she amended, "to our going a long way—together." She was looking up at him over the rim of the glass; an artery in her throat began throbbing, and curiously he remembered O'Hearn's words: "Andra Mellett is afraid of only one thing—her own emotions."

"You don't need wine," he said. "There's a fire in you that will burn you up someday."

"Better to burn up than rust."

"You'll never rust. No one with eyes like yours could ever rust." He was smiling now. "Your eyes are like a jungle cat's before feeding time."

"Look into them, then. They may tell you something." She bent closer, until he could see the tiny glint of gold in her eyes, and caught the faint, sweetish perfume of her lips.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SLOWLY he leaned back and drew a long breath. "They only tell me one thing—your destiny isn't Lost Lagoon."

"It might even be Lost Lagoon." She put down her glass so abruptly that the tinkle vibrated in his ears.

"Danny, you said something the other day that I haven't forgotten. It was about Rod Peters' idea of planting rubber and building a modern town for his workmen. It was a good dream, Danny, but not big enough. He should have dreamed in terms of thousands of acres of rubber plantations. And not only rubber. There's teak, bananas, coffee, and quinine." Leaning towards him, she spoke faster, her voice deepening with the intensity of her thought.

"Danny, this country is going to be called on very soon to take its place in the new scheme of things. It can't always remain a graveyard for Starling to dig in, or even just a hole for Trent to mine gold. It's bigger than all this, and it's going to belong to the one who has the vision to develop it."

"You need more than vision," Danny amended. "You need money—lots of money."

"That part is easy."

He smiled. "Then what's stopping you and Trent from putting it across?"

"Only one thing—Anthony Starling. The best of this land is his. The finest mahogany, the gold veins aren't on Peters' land or on ours. They're on Starling's. He won't develop it, and he won't let anyone else touch it."

"Then I'd say you're out of luck. Even down here there's such a thing as property law."

"I wonder if there isn't a higher law. In a world like ours, can you really own anything you don't make use of—like a wretched miser?" Her lips were half-parted, her eyes on fire.

Ill at ease before the woman's white-hot intensity, he asked, "What are you trying to tell me, Andra?"

"Just this. I'm young. So are you. We have years ahead of us, but not many to waste. I don't intend to sit here and watch someone else take all this. Mahogany, gold—that's only a beginning. There would be steamship lines, railroads, airports, and cities. There would be great power, and those who control the land will be the ones who control that power."

She stopped. She opened and closed her hands. "Danny, it could be us."

"I'm working for Rod Peters."

She made a swift gesture of impatience. "You're working for yourself. We all are. We work for ourselves, and for the dream that drives us. Listen, Danny. Trent had a crew of geologists down here just before you came. They confirmed the earlier reports that the richest ore is on Starling's land. Starling simply isn't interested. He wouldn't let his ore veins be worked until he's through digging, and the government won't force him because they're unfriendly to foreign mining companies like ours.

"But when you told me about the interest of the government in Peters' rubber lands, I saw a new chance. With the right kind of pressure, they might be willing to expropriate Starling's land to you for rubber plantations."

"And then use it for mining? They'd see through that in no time."

"No. Take out the mahogany and use the land for rubber or a dozen other crops. Later still—maybe two or three years later—we could develop the mine. I sent Trent up to the capital to sound out his friends, and this morning I had a message from him. He believes it can be done, but as Peters' representative you're the one to do it. First, you will have to convince the government you have the capital to develop the land, and Trent can

arrange that—he knows the proper people; he has influence, and once the thing is done we could work together. I'll see that you have all the capital you need, and when you start shipping mahogany I can get you preference on cargo boats through Alfredo Bardi."

"Where does Bardi come in on all this?"

"He doesn't. Not in any sense—I promise you."

Danny's eyes remained sceptical. "You're playing with fire, Andra. If Starling—"

"Haven't you suffered enough from the Starlings?" she flared. "Let him putter around his wormy ruins for the rest of his life."

Danny started to fill her glass again, but she shook her head. "No. No more." She looked at her watch and rose. "It's late. I don't want you to answer me to-night, Danny. I want you to think it over. Now take me down to the launch."

As he helped her into the boat, her small hand closed on his. "You've got to be realistic, Danny. You're doing a wonderfully brave job here, but you can't win with everything against you." Her eyes were suddenly grave. "There are more forces fighting you than you know, and in the end they'll beat you. I can change all that. I want to."

Her hands dropped away, the launch swerved out toward the channel, and Danny climbed back up.

But that chance encounter with Andra kept him wakeful long after he had stretched out in his hammock that night. It made several things clear—he knew at last why Trent had supported Starling so zealously in trying to get Peters out of the country. Trent was merely using the eccentric archaeologist as a screen. It would make Trent's task easier to have no one else in the country when the day came for him to fight for control of Starling's lands.

"You've got to be realistic," Andra had said. Well, that was being realistic with a vengeance. There was a cold ruthlessness to her proposal—but Danny had to admit her vision was accurate. Even with Starling's international reputation, he could not indefinitely keep this fertile country a land of ruins. And Starling's tempera-

ment had left him few friends willing to support him against Andra and Trent.

Lying there long after the camp was sleeping, Danny took stock of Andra's scheme. It was perfectly simple—she would help him with capital and political backing in exchange for control of the Starling lands. She realized as well as he did that he was in a financial jam, each day getting worse, and she had known enough not to push him. No denying the fact that with her help there would be no more worry over dwindling bank accounts, no more fight against time—he could broaden the scale of Peters' work to a plane Peters himself had never imagined.

For a moment something of Andra's own enthusiasm seized him—the eternal dream of the pioneer. To carve a new destiny out of the jungle, open it up to take its place in the economy of nations. And at what cost? A few ruins from a dead civilisation, and an old man's wrath.

Then, unbidden and unexpected, the thought of Faith came to him, and impatiently he turned. Faith had brought him nothing but trouble and betrayal, and ruthless as Andra's methods might be, Danny felt he could trust her—she would keep her word. Yet he found himself wishing that the roles of the two girls were reversed. He frowned into the darkness, "I must be a superglutton for punishment."

Danny woke to the sound of wind lashing the palms. Another day of gale to keep him from working on Temple Island—it would be better to go up river with Feagan and look over the cutting there.

But before he had finished breakfast, he saw Dabs come riding into camp and, lifting the child from her pony, he looked at her in surprise. "What's the idea of this dawn visit?"

She was even more breathless than usual. "Father's away. He took all the men up to a new ruin—they won't be back until to-morrow—and Faith says I can come with you over to Temple Island and bring a picnic supper—just us two. I've got a tablecloth and a basket of food, and cake, and—"

"Hold everything!" Danny looked doubtfully at the bending trees. "It's pretty windy for Temple Island,

Dabs. I tell you what—you come up here this evening, and we'll have supper in camp."

Her eyes proclaimed her disappointment. "Oh, please —let's go to the island. After Dad comes back I can't go over, and I've got everything ready. Please!"

Still holding her in his arms, he felt the eager thrill of her body, and for a second he pressed her close. She had grown very dear to him. She at least wanted neither to hinder him nor make use of him—she only asked his friendship. "You're a grand kid, Dabs," he said. "Don't ever leave me."

Her eyes were bright again. "Then you'll go?"

"If the wind falls by afternoon, I'll go. If it doesn't, you come up here. Right?" He lifted her back to her pony as Feagan came hurrying up. "Lay out my dinner coat to-night," Danny called to his woods boss. "I'm dining with Miss Dabs."

"Your coat's all that's left." Maliciously Feagan grinned. "They tell me her sister got your shirt."

But when Danny came back to camp that afternoon, the wind showed no signs of abating, and he ordered the cook to set a table for two inside his office. Painstakingly he lettered two formal place cards and sat down to wait for Dabs.

By six o'clock she had not come, and with a premonition that something was wrong, he rode down to the Starling hacienda. When he reached the coast the wind was howling over the lagoon, the sky dotted with fast-scudding clouds, and out towards Temple Island the storm was piling white water across the bar.

Running up the steps, Danny knocked, and from the verandah a well-remembered voice said, "Come in." He pulled open the door.

Faith rose from one of the deep chairs. Not offering to shake hands, she stood watching him with quietly questioning eyes, while within him resentment warred with the knowledge that his heart was racing at sight of her.

"I'm looking for Dabs," he said.

"I thought she was on a picnic with you. She's talked about nothing else since yesterday."

"I told her to come up to camp. She couldn't—" Cold

fear clutched him. "She wouldn't go to Temple Island in this gale?"

Running inside, Faith brought out a pair of glasses and swept the shoreline of the island. "There's no boat on the beach." She stopped and looked down at the dock, then raised a hand to her throat. "Dabs's *cayuca*—it's gone. Oh, she couldn't—"

Danny was already at the door. "Can I take your launch?"

"Father has it."

"Then the other *cayuca*?"

"You can't make it in this sea."

"That's my worry. Where are the paddles?"

Picking up two paddles from behind the door, she handed one to Danny.

"I don't want you to come," he told her.

"With a wind like this, you'll need somebody in the bow."

"I don't—"

"Oh, let's not argue!" She brushed by him. At a run they reached the end of the dock, where a *cayuca* rose and fell in the backwash of storm-tossed waters. Jumping into the bow, she held it steady until Danny cast off; then with long, even strokes they started for the ferment of water that raged over the bar.

Less than halfway across, the first full force of the gale struck them; the *cayuca* trembled throughout its length, and Faith bowed her head as spray enveloped her, drenching her *huipil* until it hung dripping from her shoulders, and her hair, torn loose by the wind's frenzy, stood out like a thick, dark veil.

Blinded by the sting of salt, Danny pulled the bow around as another wave reached up at them, lifted them, and with a hiss passed shoreward.

Heads lowered, they paddled doggedly, barely holding their own, and once, in a lull, Danny bailed with both hands. He called to Faith to rest, but the wind hurled his voice back—she didn't even hear—and with admiration he watched the broad shoulders moving rhythmically, as if they would never tire, while steadily the shining

paddle rose and fell. No hysterics there—only a cool courage and the superb staying powers of a perfect body.

Another shrieking onslaught of wind, and the little *cayuca* lurched like a stricken thing. Foot by foot, drenched and buffeted, they fought wind and wave across the lagoon. It was quieter when they reached the lee of the island, but limestone rocks were jutting up about them, and once with her paddle Faith motioned to the right, where lay the narrow entrance to the beach. Danny could see that the channel itself was studded with rocks. Their only chance would be to ride in on a wave.

Holding the *cayuca* with his paddle, Danny's eyes searched the water's edge—no sign of Dabs. Then—in the same moment they saw it—a basket on the edge of the beach, half covered by drifting sand.

Faith turned a frightened face to Danny; a wave seized them, swirled them forward, and he back-paddled with all his might to keep the bow from crashing on a rock. The wave surged by them, and slowly they settled into the green trough. But now another higher wall of angry water was bearing down on them.

"Hang on!" Above the howl of the gale he shouted, and raised his paddle. "We're going in!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WITH a hiss of foam, the wave was on them. Driven high upon its crest, Danny steered for the narrow channel, while dangerously close the sharp white cliffs swept by. To the right a wave struck with the sharp staccato of a rifle shot, recoiled, and a wall of jade-green water came surging back at them.

Caught between the two currents, Danny thrust his paddle deep into the water and leaned back until he was afraid it would break. Through flying mists he saw Faith bend over her paddle, fighting the menace of those jutting snags as the force of the backwash clutched them, and the *cayuca* scraped an unseen rock. In spite of both their efforts, the bow swerved broadside to the wind, and he felt the paddle bend beneath the strain.

"Keep on!" Frantically he shouted. "Keep on, we'll make it!"

Almost they did. Not quite. From over the bar another wave struck full abeam, and the next second they were in the water. Kicking himself clear, Danny reached out for Faith, but her head bobbed up in the milk-white foam ahead of him as she swam for shore.

Letting the waves drive him to the beach, Danny followed until his feet touched sand, then standing breast-deep in water, he steadied her, and together they walked out upon the beach. Once he looked back. Waves raged over the spot where they had been—the *cayuca* was gone.

Feeling Faith's arm tremble, he asked, "Frightened?"

"I'm frightened about Dabs." She pushed the wet hair from her eyes and hurried down the shore, where Dabs's basket lay half submerged.

Screening his face from flying sand, Danny looked up and down the beach—no sign. His eyes followed the foam-flecked line of surf—nothing there. He stooped low over the basket. A faint trace of bare footprints led up toward the fringe of palms, and a moment later they found her.

Face down, one hand beneath her cheeks, Dabs was lying half hidden by the drifting sand, and, kneeling, Danny raised her. She opened her eyes, and Danny breathed again.

Convulsively the child began to weep, until he held her close to him, whispering, "It's all right, Dabs. We're here. Faith and I both are here." Her arms tightened around his neck, and taking off his windbreaker, he folded it about her. "This is wet," he said, "but it may help."

There were tears of relief in Faith's eyes. But Danny saw that her lips were blue with cold. "How about getting out of this gale?" he said. "We're here for the night."

Faith looked down the beach. "The temple will be the best place. I'll take you." Hair tossed by the storm, wet clothes clinging to her, she led the way back among the palms, while sand stung their faces, and Danny carried Dabs in his arms.

Twilight was deepening to purple dusk when they reached a low pyramid, and there, protected from the

winds, Danny began gathering armloads of dry palmetto leaves for the girls to lie on.

Once he pulled from his pocket a wet, stained mass that had been a box of matches, and smiled ruefully. "I had the bright idea of building a signal fire, and I'd give just nine dollars for a smoke."

At the edge of the palms Faith stood looking out into the gathering blackness, a slender, shadowy figure against the sky, and, watching her, Danny's eyes hardened at an unwelcome memory—she had worn that same *huipil* the day of the survey. He could almost hear Feagan: "Women are slippery as eels dipped in lard."

Stripping off his shirt, he wrung it out and spread it over a bush. "That's more comfortable than letting it dry on me." He glanced at Faith, and the old malice flared up. "If you don't mind the informality," he added blandly.

Without answering, Faith slipped off her skirt, then sitting down beside Dabs, curled her long legs up beneath her and began shaking out her hair.

He felt a kind of formless anger—now that her fear for Dabs was over she was treating him as if he did not exist. Well, that might be the easier way for both of them—better than keeping up the semblance of a friendship that no longer existed. He leaned over to speak to Dabs—she had fallen asleep.

Hours passed. A crescent moon came up behind the temple ruins, while silent and remote those two sat upon their mats of palmetto leaves. Once Dabs woke up, shivering. "Won't they take us off to-night?" she asked.

"Never a chance," Danny answered. "No one knows we're here. They'll think you and Faith are up at the ruins with your father, and Feagan won't have any idea where to look for me." He stroked her hair. "Why did you come here, Dabs?"

"Don't be mad." She reached out for his hand. "I thought if I came over, you'd come too. It didn't seem to be blowing hard until I got across the bar. Then I couldn't keep the *cayuca* straight, and I hit a rock and went over. I was scared. Don't let's talk about it." She closed her eyes, and almost at once was asleep again.

A long, comfortless night. Faith soon stretched out beside Dabs, but Danny could feel she was not sleeping. From beyond the temple the moon threw shadows of broken masonry across the sand, and somewhere back among the palms a flock of parrots began chattering above the ceaseless moaning of the wind.

Filtering down through the leaves, the moonlight reached to where Faith was lying, silvering her thick hair and long, bronzy legs, while without moving Danny watched her. One bare arm was thrown over Dabs in an attitude of protection, and with slow, steady rhythm her breast rose and fell. Even in repose she radiated vitality, as if within her the fire of life burned deep and strong. And she *was* lovely. Not only with the loveliness of a young body, but—

She had raised her head. The long eyelashes swept up as her eyes opened, and briefly she looked at him, then laid her head back on her arm.

She had dismissed him. Within himself Danny felt the old anger stir. She was so sublimely self-sufficient. He had a crazy desire to startle her, to break down for once that everlasting reserve. He wondered what she would do if he took her in his arms, as she lay there, and kissed her. What would she do then?

Well, what *would* she do? Probably look at him with those coolly judicial eyes, as if he were some new species of bug. Danny remembered O'Hearn's tale of the army officer who had followed her out from the States. Had he kissed her? Those lips were—

In swift rebellion at his thoughts, Danny rose to his feet. Always her presence troubled him. It had been so from the very first; and even from the first she had brought him ill fortune. She possessed one loyalty—to her father, and after that, perhaps Trent.

Hearing a rustle, he turned. She was sitting up and with both hands she had thrown back her hair. In the moonlight he saw her eyes were on him, and her first words were almost an echo of his thoughts.

"The Starling family is always getting you into trouble, isn't it?"

"Why blame the whole family? Dabs never double-crossed me."

"Danny!"

He started. She hadn't called him that in many a day. He waited.

But for a time she sat looking down at her sleeping sister. "I want to talk to you about that day we surveyed the boundary," she said at last.

Danny stiffened. "What's to talk about? It's all over."

"No, it's not over."

"It is for me. You got what you wanted. And I'm not going to get caught twice."

"Even if I got what I wanted, it wasn't what you think." Laying both hands in the sand before her, she leaned forward. "Danny, please look at me."

He saw that her eyes were very earnest, but deep within him he heard the warning, "Don't get caught! Don't get caught again."

"Danny, it hasn't been much fun knowing what you think of me."

He moved back. "Do you sit up nights worrying?"

"Sometimes."

"Then don't."

She winced before the flat finality of his tone, and he added, "Look. The time to think of all this was before you jockeyed me out of that road."

"I did think of it. I thought of it all night before the survey. But I had to do what I did."

"You mean your father made you?"

"I was afraid of what he might do. I know Father better than anyone else, but I know what he's capable of when something threatens his work. He wouldn't hesitate at anything. When he heard about that road he was like a crazy man, and for some reason Trent egged him on."

"If that piece of land was so precious, why didn't your father buy it in the first place?"

"He tried to, years ago. But the company that owned it was in litigation and couldn't sell. Next thing Father knew, Mr. Peters had bought it. That's part of the reason he disliked Mr. Peters."

"Why didn't he buy it from Rod?"

"Mr. Peters wouldn't sell."

"So you decided it was simpler to steal it?"

"I made Father promise to let you alone if I could persuade you to give up the road. I did it because I knew you hadn't a chance against Father and Trent both, but I knew it was a mean, low trick, and I hated myself for it." "Even Dabs hasn't forgiven me. But I just want you to know I didn't do it to hurt you, and that I've been sorry every since—truly."

Irresolute, he listened. If this was acting, it was superbly done, but he wanted to believe it wasn't acting. Minutes passed; dawn began lighting the sky, bringing a faint colour to the world, while against his will Danny felt his anger draining away.

"It hasn't been much fun," he heard her say. "We had such grand times together."

But still he did not answer, and she asked, "What are you thinking?"

"Just wondering if I'm a natural-born sucker."

"But you can't—"

"That's just the trouble—I can't. It's always too much effort for me to keep mad very long." He laid his hand on hers. "Let's call the whole war off."

She gave a quick, glad cry of release, and her own hand closed on his. "Danny, I'm so glad."

A little sheepishly he grinned. "And won't Feagan think I'm a pushover!"

"Is Feagan your spiritual guide?"

"No, but he has a few definite ideas about your sex."

They had awakened Dabs, and she rubbed her eyes and sat up. "Balls of fire, I'm thirsty." She ran her tongue over her dry lips. "And I kept dreaming about the basket of cakes I lost."

A red, gigantic sun was touching the horizon, and stretching her arms high above her head, Faith rose. "You don't know how much better I feel," she said. "I'm a new woman."

He could tell the difference in her voice—and he felt better himself. It was as if a load had been taken from him. He wasn't cold any more. But he said only, "You

don't look like a new woman. In those shorts you look like a boy—about sixteen."

She half-turned, and catching the profile of her high breasts he reddened until again she laughed. "And you look like Tarzan in the jungle."

"Tarzan didn't have freckles on his chest," Dabs objected.

Together they went up to the temple, where the warmth of the sun brought new life to their bodies, and Danny lifted Dabs to the sacrifical stone, while she drank rain water thirstily.

Later they went exploring through the temple, picking their way over crumbling retaining walls and broken stone masonry, stopping to look at the great limestone masks, with their flat noses, grotesquely shaped tongues, and curling fangs. And up on the summit of the pyramid, Faith showed him the holy of holies, a little intricately carved temple.

"It's the highest form of sanctuary in the Mayan religion," she said. "Father sent twenty bas-relief carvings from this temple to the National Museum. They're supposed to be among the most wonderful in the new world."

"What a kick he must have got!"

"He did. The trouble is that here, and in the rest of the temples, all the perishable things are gone. We know from their history that the Mayas had feather instruments and wood carvings and embossed leather. But they've all been destroyed by wind and rain and animals."

Danny's mind flashed back to that temple in the underground cavern. He remembered the intricate featherwork on the altar, and the wood carvings. Up here, on the surface, time had erased even stone walls. Islands had been eroded into the sea. But those carvings, sealed off in the temple, had been safe from time's destruction for nearly a thousand years.

Leaving the temple, Faith found a handful of zapotes and they ate the sweet purple fruit ravenously, then later walked down to the water's edge, hoping to signal the servants at the hacienda, but the place was deserted. Once Danny walked entirely around the island. On the ocean side the wind lashed the waves into white foam far

out to the horizon—a scene of indescribably wild ferocity, with low clouds scudding across the sky, and coming back, Danny sat down beside Faith in the lee of the temple.

No sign of boa or human life all day—only the sea gulls crying overhead, and the never-ending wind.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

By late afternoon it was beginning to get chill again. Dabs was crying with hunger, and Danny knew that another night on the island would leave them all weaker and colder.

"We've got to get Dabs out of this," he told Faith. "If the wind dies down a little by sunset, I'm going to swim for the hacienda. Besides, I can't look another zapote in the face."

"It's just as well. There aren't any more."

By dusk the wind was moderating, but as they walked down to the beach Faith looked out at the rock-strewn water. "You ought to let me swim with you. I know where the channel is better than you."

"You?" He laughed. "You can't even follow a straight line on dry land."

Her eyes gladdened at his laugh—he could find it in him to joke about the survey, and she knew she was forgiven. But she persisted. "Wouldn't it be safer for us both to swim back together?"

He shook his head. "You'd better stay with Dabs. It's not a long pull, you know."

Wading in, he began swimming, but not until he passed the first line of breakers did he realize how much of his vitality the past night and day had taken. A high sea was running down the coast, and he picked his way carefully among the jutting rocks, but once across the bar he threw himself into the long, easy crawl that was second nature to him, and twenty minutes later dragged himself up on the hacienda dock.

Three frightened peons ran down to him, and, send-

ing them off to the island, Danny lay back on the dock, too tired and winded to move.

Later, through a haze of weariness, he heard the girls' voices, and later still, wrapped in one of Anthony Starling's great purple bathrobes, restored by food and hot coffee, Danny felt as near physical bliss as he had ever hoped.

"I'd like to sit here for weeks without moving—without even thinking," he said to Faith.

"Why don't you? Dabs and I will feed you."

"And your dad will mow me down for wearing his bathrobe. No, I've got to get back. My tattooed woman-hater must be wondering where I am."

Feagan's relief at sight of Danny was profanely eloquent. "I thought some of those lizards down in Bajo might have got you, and we ransacked the town," Feagan said, when Danny told him the story. "I should of known a woman was at the bottom of it."

"The woman in this case being ten years old."

"Sure, sure. Some start earlier than others."

But when Danny told of his truce with Faith, Feagan threw up his hands. "All a dame has to do is snivel a few times and say she's sorry, and she gets away with murder. Why don't you hurry up and get born?"

"Faith doesn't snivel." Danny looked at Feagan suspiciously. "I sometimes wonder if you're as tough as you lay it on."

"I'm tough enough to keep from bein' cat meat for every starry-eyed gal that slips me a smile." Then he nodded towards Danny's shack. "There's a thick letter from Peters on your desk."

Eagerly Danny tore it open. It was the first letter Peters had written, and held good news and bad. He was out of the hospital, "still trussed up like a mummy," the scrawl ran. Then came the bad news. Peters' creditors had given notice of foreclosure unless bank interest was paid. "I think," he wrote, "they've had pressure put on them from the Mellett family." Then, taking a desperate gamble so characteristic of Rod, he had contracted to sell two shiploads of mahogany to a New Orleans firm, guaranteeing delivery within six weeks.

Six weeks! Danny's eyes rose to the calendar—what miracle could Peters be hoping for, to get a double cargo of logs ready in six weeks, shorthanded, and with the fever season almost on them? With a long-drawn-out sigh he read on.

"Danny, the boats will be off Lost Lagoon in a little more than a month, and you've got to get our best mahogany on board. Pick the very cream of it. I've promised them lumber such as they've never seen, and I know you and Feagan can do it. If you don't, it's curtains for yours very truly."

In silent consternation Danny threw the letter across the desk to Feagan, and watched the big Irishman's scowl.

"We can't do it!" Feagan burst out. "The boss himself couldn't."

Danny folded the letter. "The answer is we've got to do it."

"But—"

"Look, Feagan, if we're going broke, it doesn't matter how we do it. Even if Rod's bankers don't foreclose, we haven't enough money to meet two more pay rolls. So let's shoot the works. If we put that cargo aboard, we'll be out of debt and have something to spare."

"You're as crazy as Peters." Feagan was close to the boiling point.

"Being crazy has lots of advantages down here." Danny picked up a work-sheet. "How soon can we get our reserve trucks in operation?"

"Maybe to-morrrow."

"Not maybe, and not to-morrow. To-night. Put the emergency crew on them, and have them ready to move in the morning. Go down to Bajo and pick up any stray hands looking for jobs—we're going to need more men."

"Those glue-feet don't know enough to get out of their own way."

"We'll teach them. And you better let our own men know what they're in for."

Wrathfully the woods boss stamped out, and later Danny heard him bellowing from the bunkhouse. "You

boys can throw away your hammocks. You won't have to bother sleepin' for the next six weeks."

Danny himself did little sleeping that night—for the first time he could see his problem in measurable terms. There was a certain grim satisfaction in that knowledge, but he had to face the fact that they could no longer look to Peters for money unless they sold the cargo. They had less than six short weeks to win or lose—and there could be no middle road. Wide-eyed, he lay in the darkness, taking stock of his equipment, shifting his plans, trying to find some glimmer of hope.

Once his mind flashed back to Andra, and, leaving his hammock, he walked to the door. He didn't like her proposal; he didn't like working with Mellett. And yet —had he the right to refuse? Would Peters himself refuse?

It was curious to realize that he had only to go to Andra to-morrow and his money troubles would be over —there would be money enough and backing enough to ensure success. At a price. Everything seemed to be at a price. Well, there was no need to decide yet. She had told him to think it over.

Next morning Danny and Feagan held council. Peters' letter had changed their plans completely, their goal now would be to take out only the very best mahogany from the most accessible groves. Part of it could come from Temple Island; the rest would be brought down in two large booms from the upper country. There the best mahogany grew—but it was also the most distant and expensive to get unless the rainy season came soon and the logs could be floated out to the main stream.

Whatever the outcome, from now on it would be a race against time—a battle with weather, fever, and the ceaseless malevolence of the jungle. Both men felt the thrill of the challenge, both knew that if they failed there would be no second chance. It was a last gamble, and in that knowledge Danny and Feagan looked up from their work-sheets into each other's eyes.

"Can do?" Danny asked.

"Can try."

And the race was on.

From that day forward, the mahogany camp knew

little rest. Long before dawn the cutters had finished breakfast and were off into the forest; soon behind them tractors and four-wheeled trailers began moving, and moonlight saw the crews unloading logs on the banks of Lost River.

Between Danny and Feagan there was an implicit understanding that in the actual logging operations Feagan's word was final. Danny's domain lay in the engineering field, and in the maintenance of the camp. It was an ideal working arrangement. They had both become relentless drivers of men, sparing neither themselves nor the crews. Danny was building only such roads as were absolutely needed to get out the cargo, giving them barely time to settle before Feagan's trucks drove in for the precious jungle harvest.

They took on twenty men from Bajo and doubled the number of trailers. All this meant more gasoline, more supplies—in the face of steadily diminishing funds. Danny was deliberately stepping up his expenses. He was, in his own words, "shooting the works."

But in ever-increasing volume the logs began flowing, and the men themselves were responding to the test. Every one of them knew it was a race not only against time, but against the coming of the rains. Already in Bajo fever had broken out—light cases—but the first week after Peters' letter two of Danny's men had taken to their hammocks, and a week later five more. O'Hearn's launch began stopping daily at the camp, usually with Faith Starling, for this was the season when she spent most of her time helping him care for the sick.

Days of grinding work. The weight of his task, the uncertainty of its fulfilment, the knowledge of its importance, kept Danny unwelcome company, day and night. He was getting gaunt and profanely Feagan urged him to go slow, but Danny only shook his head. Too much depended on the next few weeks. And Feagan himself grew irritable. "The men can't go at this pace," he warned Danny the night they were making out the pay roll. "You've gotta let 'em ease up."

"They can ease all over the place when the job's done." Danny looked up wearily from the long line of

figures, then mechanically scrawled a requisition on the bank. "Next month I'll have to go up for this pay roll myself." He handed the time chart to Feagan.

"Why?"

"Because I'll have to borrow half of it—if the bank's crazy enough to lend it to me." And Feagan understood why Danny so seldom smiled.

The same night that the messenger left for the money, Danny had a note from Andra Mellett. "I'm tired of this neglect," she wrote. "Come up this evening, hermit, and we'll have a drink together."

It was almost dark by the time he reached the Mellett hacienda. Alfredo Bardi was just leaving the dock, and the two men nodded briefly.

"Your old pal Bardi doesn't care much for me," Danny told Andra as she met him on the porch. "He just gave me one of his double-edged stiletto looks."

She laughed. "He doesn't like anyone I'm fond of," and Danny answered, "Thanks."

He stepped into the lamplight, and looking up at him, she cried, "Danny! You're positively emaciated. What's happened?"

"Hard work. I'm allergic."

"But that's all wrong. You must learn to take things easy."

"Come over to camp sometime and show me how."

She brought him a tall Scotch and soda. "Now," she commanded, "tell me just exactly what's going on. Why haven't I seen you, why do you look like a ghost, and what is it all about?"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

SEATED on the deep couch, he told her of Peters' letter and of the battle to get out the logs; he told her of the setbacks—fever, trucks that stripped their gears, and roads that bogged down overnight. And while he talked, she smoked, and her eyes never left him, her small foot tapping in some swift inward urgency.

"I think we'll come out all right," he ended, "but I can't stand any more financial bumps."

Rapidly she shook her head. "Danny, I could slap you. Here you are, fighting the biggest fight of your life, and not once do you think of coming to the only person who can help you."

"You?"

"Me."

"Oh, I thought about you—a lot."

"And did you think about what I said down in Bajo?"

"Yes." He put down his glass. "I don't like the idea for two reasons. First, I don't like the prospect of working with Brother Trent, and second, I don't like taking land that belongs to Starling."

"Who isn't using it and never will." The restless foot moved faster. "What do you owe Anthony Starling?"

"Not a thing. But he still remains the owner. I know there's another way of looking at it—there is for most things. Peters will be down later. If he wants it your way, that's up to him."

"It will be too late by then." She leaned toward him. "Danny, you're a queer, lone-wolf sort of person. I never know just where you stand. I've never decided whether you're a very simple person or very complex. Maybe that's why I send you notes begging you to come up and see me when I ought to ignore you. But I do know this—you need men, and money, and I can get you both—and through Bardi I can get you anything you want from the steamship company. But I can't wait much longer for you to decide. You're not only making it hard for yourself; you're making it hard for me."

"You mean Trent?"

"Yes. He thinks you're just using me to play for time. I may not be able to hold him back much longer."

"What does he want to do?"

"Ruin you."

"Why?"

"Danny, don't you realize it would be very profitable for Trent to buy you out for ten cents on the dollar? Then, as owner of the Peters concession, he could go to the government himself and work for the expropriation of Starling's land."

Danny nodded. "I used to wonder why your brother was so noble in backing up Starling. Now I see. He was working for himself first."

"I can change all that," she reminded him.

Danny drained his glass.

"Don't you believe me?" she persisted.

"I believe every word."

"Then why—?" She stopped and gave a sigh of vexation—she had asked that question before. Danny could see how deeply his own scruples must madden her. With her there were no half measures; whatever she wanted, it was with all the strength of her undisciplined and avid will. To her his help was paramount. If he failed her, she would be doomed to working out an unpredictable destiny with a brother she had no affection for, and little regard. Danny was her chance.

And something more. It showed in her eyes. Cigarette forgotten, lips parted, she was looking at him, while her breath came faster. And now she leaned toward him, letting him read the message that burned openly in her eyes, letting him see deep within her.

"We could be partners, Danny," she was saying. "Partners in every way."

She waited, but he did not speak. Silently he watched those flecks of gold glinting in her eyes, and he wondered if their strange, uneasy friendship had reached the crossroads at last.

So for a time they sat, in a kind of wordless communion, neither of them quite willing to break the spell—then a step grated on the porch behind them. In swift

resentment Andra whirled. Trent Mellett stood looking at them with the smile that Danny had come to dislike, and his eyes were a little glassy. If he realized his sister's annoyance at the interruption, he gave no sign, but Danny saw at once that he was harbouring some inward rage.

He came forward. "I was going to hunt you up, Gayforth." Whisky lay heavy on his breath. "Faith tells me you're plenty busy."

"Plenty."

Mellett poured himself a drink. "Then let's talk fast and plain. While I was up in the capital Andra made you a proposition. That's two weeks ago. How long does it take you to make up your mind?"

"*Trent!*" Andra's voice rang out in warning, but savagely Trent turned on her. "You keep out. I'll handle this. It begins to look as if I'm the only one who can handle it."

Whatever the cause of Mellett's anger, Danny could see it rapidly getting the upper hand.

With unsteady fingers Trent laid down his glass. "My little sister wants me to leave you strictly alone until we have your answer. I'm of the opinion that pressure might get quicker action."

"I don't respond well to pressure."

"You will if it's heavy enough." Trent's eyes shifted to Andra. "Did you know that while Gayforth has been stringing you along, Peters made a deal to sell enough mahogany to put them in the clear? Your boy friend is taking you for a ride."

So that was it. To Trent it looked as if Danny had made use of Andra to gain a respite from interference.

Danny gave an imperceptible shrug. He had no explanations to make to Trent; the time for that had passed. He picked up his hat and, still keeping his voice casual, said to Andra, "It's getting a little crowded here. I'll be running along."

He turned, but Trent barred his way. "Stop stalling, Gayforth." His voice had thickened. "I want an answer from you—yes or no."

"My answer to you is—get out of my way."

They stood very close, eyes wary and waiting. The tick of a clock from within sounded curiously loud. Then Andra spoke the one word, *"Trent!"* It was quietly said, yet it carried unmistakable command, and its effect on Trent was electric—his eyes changed, he half-turned toward Andra, looked at her for a full second, and stepped aside. Danny went down the steps.

At the bend in the path, Danny looked back. Up on the porch brother and sister were still standing at gaze beneath the light. They neither spoke nor moved. Then slowly, very deliberately, Andra raised her hand and struck Trent across the face.

Three days later came disaster. Conscious of a thumping head and a dull fever, Danny had ridden back early from the woods, but the moment he stepped inside the little office, Feagan's distracted face drove all thoughts of self away.

"What's wrong?" Instinctively he braced himself.

"The pay roll money." Feagan could scarcely speak.

"What about it?"

"It's gone."

As if all strength had left him, Danny sat down, while Feagan told his tale. Five miles from camp the messenger had been knocked unconscious on the trail, and the satchel of money taken. With six men Feagan hurried to the scene, but found only the tracks of two pairs of shoes leading to the water's edge. Feagan had sent alarms to Bajo and along the coast. "But that job was hatched up in Bajo," the woods boss said.

Danny did not answer—it was probably hatched in the mind of Trent Mellett.

As if blurred by distance, he heard Feagan's voice again. "Where does this leave us?"

"With enough money to pay the men two weeks' back wages, and nothing at all for our storage at the warehouse." Danny roused himself. "Get the launch ready—I'm going up to the capital." Suddenly dizzy, he laid his face in his hands.

Feagan looked back from the door. "You're not sick, are you?"

"I wish I was delirious." He heard the door close while he sat hunched forward, mutely suffering. This, then, was the end. He had been close to defeat before, but never like this, never without some ray of hope, some possible plan. Now there was nothing. Except—he opened his eyes and closed them. Except Andra.

Lost to the passing of time, he sat there until a cool hand touched his head, and still unmoving, he murmured dully, "Hi, Dabs."

No answer. He opened his eyes to see Faith standing before him. He reached toward her and swayed.

Instantly her arms steadied him. "What's happened? You look—" She raised his head. "Danny, what's happened?"

"I think I'm licked." His voice was drained of everything but weariness.

Within the dimness of the room, her arms tightened about him, holding him through a long, swirling silence. Flies were buzzing outside, and once, opening his eyes, he saw her face as in a moving mist. Later still he heard his own voice speaking. "They took the pay roll."

"Don't worry, Danny."

He wanted to tell her all that had happened, to find release in speech, but that misty cloud kept blotting out the world. The warmth and closeness of her had become his only hold on reality, and like a weary child he clung to her, laying his face against her arm. On his burning forehead he felt the benediction of her hand, and suddenly, as if flood gates long closed had opened, he began talking out of the depths of his desolation, talking in a low, heartbreaking monotone of a fight waged almost singlehanded to help a stricken friend.

"It was old Rod's dream." So faint the words she bent her head to listen. "At first I didn't care a whoop about mahogany or rubber plantations or making a home for the families of his workers. That sort of thing doesn't sound like much to talk about—you've got to live it." Silence. Again the voice, "I just didn't want to let Rod down. I used to think of him coming back, strong again, like the Peters I used to know. I'd take him up the river and show him the booms, full of the finest mahogany

he'd ever seen, and I'd say, 'There's your cargo, old son.' "

The voice trailed into a defeated silence. "Well, there won't be any cargo now."

Unseen, she answered, "No one could have done one half what you did, Danny. No matter what happens, he'll know that."

"What good will that do Rod—or the men? They'll be on the move again, looking for jobs just because I fell down."

"You didn't fall down. Don't think about it now. Just rest. Think about rest."

The throbbing in his head dulled the meaning of her words, but the voice was comfort itself, and the bitter stings were passing. Peace descended on him slowly, deeper than any peace he had ever known. Once more he reached out to her, once more he tried to open his eyes, tried ineffectually to smile, then all the world went black.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

He was in his hammock when he awoke, Faith and O'Hearn beside him. He tried to raise his head, but the effort made the world reel, and O'Hearn laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"Lie still," he warned. "Some day, *amigo,* you will learn that even a body sound and healthy as yours is not indestructible. You have fever, but that is unimportant. The important thing is rest."

Danny licked his lips. "How long have I been here?"

"Three hours only. Faith brought me up. You will stay two days in bed, or three—"

"I can't stay in bed. I've got a job."

O'Hearn's heavy shoulders raised in a shrug of despair. "Never will these mad *Americanos* learn—"

Danny's eyes sought Faith. "Was that a dream about the money?"

She shook her head. "No, it's gone, Danny."

He struggled to sit upright. "Then I've got to get to

the capital. There's some money of my own up there. With that and what's left, we may keep the boys going."

"Let Feagan get it, Danny."

"He can't be spared."

Gently, but with a strength that surprised him, Faith pressed his shoulders back on the pillow. "Danny, you're too sick to go. You couldn't make it."

His eyes closed, his head moved distractedly from side to side, and O'Hearn bent over him in new concern. For a second Faith watched him, then she straightened.

"Danny."

He opened his eyes.

"I'll get that money for you. I can take the launch and be back in no time."

He searched her face, then smiled. His body relaxed its tension, and O'Hearn gave a nod of satisfaction. Five minutes later, in a wobbly hand, Danny had signed a cheque for the last penny of his savings, and Faith and O'Hearn were on their way down the river leaving him in Feagan's care.

O'Hearn bit the end from a fresh cigar. "Our Danny is more sick of heart than body. In fact, it is not Danny I worry about now, but you."

She looked at him in surprise. "I'm perfectly well."

"*Si*. But when your father hears of this—" His lips puckered. "Why tell him?"

Faith's eyes clouded. "He would find out. I'd rather get it over at once."

"Then I think I will go up to the hacienda with you. You may need an ally."

O'Hearn proved a true prophet. Anthony was mildly amused at the news of Danny's fever, but when Faith told him of her errand to the capital, the storm burst in true Starling ferocity. Too angry for connected speech, he gave vent to a succession of verbal explosions. She was not to go—that was final. Bad enough that any daughter of his should even contemplate such insane treachery—yes, treachery. Danny was an unqualified polecat—a destructive, mahogany-hacking barbarian—and fever was too good for him.

Up and down the room Anthony raged, while O'Hearn

smoked and Faith sat ominously silent. Once Starling peered down at her. "That you should side with him against me!"

"Oh, Father, I'm not taking sides! The man is ill and desperate. He needs help."

"He won't get it from any member of the Starling family. That's my last word."

Faith rose. "You make me ashamed of you. No, don't bluster any more—it just doesn't work." Her own anger was flaring. "I'm tired to death seeing you and Trent laying your mean little schemes to drive one man to the wall. He needs help—he's terribly alone—and I'm going to help him. So let's not say things we'll both be sorry for later." She ran up the stairs.

Starling glared at the doctor, who sat politely attentive. "This"—he shook his grizzled mane—"this is my reward for being a good father."

"Bosh!" The word floated out from O'Hearn's cigar smoke, and once again Starling's eyebrows rose to battle.

"What did you say?" he bellowed.

"I said 'bosh.' In Spanish I would use a word more pungent. You've been no father at all, Antonio. You are a great scientist, but as a father you are—how do you say?—a washout. You are incredibly selfish and wilfully blind. It has always been your life you thought of, never Faith's." O'Hearn was beginning to warm up to his subject. "And now comes Gayforth—"

"That redheaded, meddling—"

"What does it solve to call names? You and Trent have been so intent to crush him that you drive Faith to him out of sympathy alone. And what is more important, you are making of Danny Gayforth a man. He is nobody's fool, and I should not care to be the one who arouses his anger. You are playing with fire, Antonio. In all kindness and out of old friendship, I say that you and Trent are driving Faith away from you." O'Hearn laid down his cigar. "Which reminds me I promised Feagan to look in on your redheaded whippersnapper to-morrow."

Danny had little need of the doctor. Within two days

his fever had gone, but Feagan, remembering Faith's orders, kept him in his hammock. Meanwhile, the woods boss made no secret of his disapproval at sending Faith to the capital.

"You just beg for trouble," he said when Danny was well enough to listen. "That dame pulled a fast one on you with the survey, and now you sign your last dollar over to her."

Danny nodded in weak amusement. "I wouldn't be a bit surprised if she skips the country," he confided. "She's that kind."

"I ain't sayin' that. All I'm sayin' is you got so many women busy savin' you, it's God's own miracle you're even alive."

"Who else is on the rescue squad?"

"Well, Andra Mellett. She dropped in twice yesterday to ask about you. I told her you were still blotto. What's she think this is—a mahogany camp or a young ladies' finishin' school?" Feagan began peeling off his shirt. "I don't feel comfortable takin' a shower any more."

Danny's eyes fell to the tattooed torso. "You're just afraid she'll copy one of your designs for a dress."

That same night Danny's recovery was complete—Faith came back with a bulging satchel—all that remained of the combined funds of Roderick Peters and Daniel Gayforth.

Seeing the relief in his eyes, she laughed. "Were you worried I'd been held up?"

Feagan opened the satchel. "He wasn't worried about the money—but he sure fretted for his nurse."

She shook her head. "What a baby."

Danny grinned. "You know what's on Feagan's mind? He thinks I'm in love."

"What do you think?"

"Think? I know I'm head over heels."

She called to Feagan. "When did he first get delirious?"

The woods boss glanced up. "Search me, lady. I've only been with him two months."

Until late that night Feagan worked on the adding machine. "We've got barely enough jack to pay the

boys," he announced. "But what about our back rent down at the warehouse?"

"It will have to wait. We'll see what happens."

And three days later they saw.

Feagan came raging back to camp—he had been refused access to the warehouse because of arrears in rent.

"I took a truck down to get the spikes and chains we need for the booms," he told Danny. "They wouldn't let me in."

"Who wouldn't?"

"The new watchman and Bardi. Someday I'll smack that wop loose from his gold teeth."

Danny frowned—Trent was losing no time putting on the pressure. "They're not worried about the rent. We have enough stuff in those warehouses to guarantee the rent ten times over. They're using it as an excuse to hold us up."

"So what?" Feagan asked.

"So we're going down and take what we need."

At the prospect of a fight Feagan's eyes were alight. "In that case, I'll just fetch a few huskies along."

And Danny noticed, as they rumbled down in the truck, that Feagan had brought six of his most stalwart workers. An equal number of hickory axe-handles lay neatly stacked behind the driver's seat.

Outside O Hearn's hospital, they saw Dabs standing in the doorway, and she waved to them when they passed.

"Pretty soon, Doc'll have the whole Starling family helpin'," Feagan commented.

Danny did not answer. His thoughts lay ahead.

Their visit was not unexpected. As they pulled up outside the warehouse door, three men were standing there—Alfredo Bardi, Big Pete, the mine foreman, and Trent Mellett. Jumping down from the truck, Danny and Feagan walked toward them across the dock, while Trent watched with a faint look of amusement.

"Want something, Gayforth?"

"I want to get in the warehouse."

"That's out. Bardi has orders not to let you take anything until the rent's paid."

"Who gave the orders?"

"I did. Any more questions?"

"Look, Trent." Danny tried to be patient. "All I want—"

"It isn't what you want, Bub—it's what I want. How soon are you going to get that through your head?"

Danny hesitated. Whatever strictly legal right Mellett might have, time was pressing, and to be cut off from their stored equipment would cripple them.

Even while he stood there, a ring of curious, expectant eyes, drawn by the signs of conflict, began forming about them on the dock. Men hurried out of the warehouse, and Danny's own followers were climbing down from the truck.

But all this Danny neither heard nor saw. For him the world had narrowed to one presence—the smilingly arrogant face of Trent Mellett. Here was one who had opposed him from the very first, had tried in every way he could to harm him in the eyes of Faith. And now all those yesterdays had reached their final, inescapable end.

For the last time Danny spoke. "Mellett, I need those chains and spikes. They're ours, and I came down to take them peaceably. But I'm going to take them. Now, will you step aside?"

The reply came lightning swift. Without warning, Trent struck. It was a blow aimed at Danny's jaw, but catching him just below the cheek, hurled him back against Feagan with vicious impact.

Staggering, Danny fell. He heard Feagan's growl, and reached up just in time to grasp his woods boss by the arm. Steadying himself, he waited, then quietly pushed Feagan back.

"You keep out." He turned his bruised face toward Mellett. "This is my job."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Out on the dock, dead hush had fallen. Animal-like and tense, caught by the quick contagion of battle, that circle of watching faces moved closer—on one side, Feagan's men; on the other, the followers of Bardi and Trent. Indifferent to the blazing sun, heedless of the heat that rose in waves about them, the rapt attention of every man was fixed out there where Danny came slowly forward and Trent waited.

Lips drawn tight, eyes watchful, there was a cold ferocity about Mellett that warned Danny how deeply the man hated him. Trent had always hated him. It could not be otherwise; cross purposes and distrust had so conditioned them that it could only end as it was ending now, and to this outcome Faith and Andra both had played their involuntary roles.

Softly Danny's rubber soles rustled on the dock as he took another step. Barely an arm's length between them now; that circle of watching men had ceased to breathe. Then Danny stopped, and Trent laughed aloud.

"What's the matter, Gayforth? Looking for a woman's skirt to hide behind?"

Danny's foot moved a scant inch closer, and in the same second both men struck. Both blows reached home. Gasping, Danny caught the full force of Mellett's fist driving the wind from his lungs, and on Trent's face a red and angry spot stood out.

They closed. Toe to toe, heads lowered, arms driving like pistons, they fought across the dock, making no effort to guard until, before a savage hail of blows, Danny gave ground. Trent was fighting as the cougar fights, weaving in, striking, and away again—always shifting, always coldly confident. His weight was counting, but even more than that, the days of fever had left Gayforth weaker than he knew. Haze blurred his sight, and he lifted a hand to his eyes Something was wrong—he

couldn't get going, every move was sluggish. It was like living in slow motion.

A blow spun him to the edge of the dock, and he fell on one knee. With both hands he steadied himself, while Trent crouched forward, the light of triumph already in his eyes. "Don't like this, do you, Gayforth?" came the goading voice.

Racked with pain, Danny rose. Sweat burned his eyes, and the salty taste of blood was on his lips. If he could only get started! He saw the eyes of his men cloudy with apprehension, and behind him he heard Feagan's voice crack. "Watch it, boy! Watch it, for Christ's sake!"

Trent was coming in for the kill.

Then, high and piercing, a cry ripped through the crowd; a streak of white flashed across the dock, and Dabs ran between the two men. Voice shrill with terror, she beat small ineffectual fists against Trent's chest. "Don't you touch him! Don't—"

Trent's arm swept out, striking the child full in the face, flinging her a dozen feet behind him. "Get that brat to hell away from here!" He lowered his head and came on.

Dabs fell at Feagan's feet, and the woods boss lifted her in his arms, but as he turned back, he gave a gasp of disbelief. Danny had risen—a Danny that Feagan had never seen. Eyes blazing, lips drawn, he crouched for an instant, then as Feagan watched, he sprang.

A straight, clean blow rocked Trent's head back and drew a long "ah" of amazement from the watching men. Trent swerved toward the crowd, but now Danny was on him, giving him no chance to make a stand. The mist was gone from his eyes, the weakness of fever forgotten; only a savage singing in his blood and one relentless purpose in his soul. Danny was awake at last.

Foot by foot, blow by jolting blow, he drove Trent across the dock, lashing out at the dark face, following his every movement. Once, desperate and bedwildered, Trent rushed, but Danny stopped him in his tracks, and toe to toe they fought with vicious fury, their breath drawn in broken, rasping sobs.

"Madre di mi alma!" whispered one from the crowd. "Flesh and blood cannot stand that." And even as the words were spoken, Trent staggered. Both eyes puffed, face bruised and bloody, he was not smiling now.

Feagan's men had gone wild. The dock shook beneath that pandemonium of shouts and stamping feet, but Danny neither heard nor saw—his eyes were for Trent alone.

Wet with sweat and grey with strain, they were fighting close to Feagan's truck. Another blow, and Trent's head bowed. He leaned against the wheel of the truck, and with eyes fast glazing, stared about him. A cry went up from the milling crowd. "He's got it! He can't!—"

Every voice hushed. Whipping to the driver's seat, Trent's hand had closed on a heavy wrench, and with all his might he hurled it at Danny's head.

Danny dodged. Grazing his shoulder, the wrench clattered to the dock, but now Trent was on him, and locked together, they swayed to the very edge. Tearing himself loose, Danny stepped back. Deliberately he measured the distance, his right hand struck with all the force left in him, and Trent crumpled face downward on the dock.

Danny's men went mad. Hands reached out to him, pounding his shoulder, and jubilantly Feagan lifted Dabs high above the shouting, thronging crowd, and set her down at the far end of the wharf.

"Stay here, toots. Your boy friend's a little busy now." He hurried back.

Danny had caught sight of Alfredo Bardi, and at Gayforth's angry eyes, Bardi looked hopelessly about him, but Danny shook his head. "I'm not going to hurt you. Let's have the key to that warehouse."

Bardi's hand jerked from his pocket; a small bright object flashed out over the river, then disappeared, and dramatically Bardi folded his arms. "The key is there, senor."

For a single second Danny stood over him, then turned away, and Bardi breathed again.

Climbing into the truck, Danny touched the starter, while blankly Feagan looked up. "What goes?" he spluttered. "You ain't gonna—!"

Danny threw the truck into gear. "Stand aside down there," he called through puffed lips.

Bardi and a dozen others scrambled to safety as Danny headed for the warehouse door. A crash, a shriek of splintered wood, and the door ripped from its hinges. Halfway inside the warehouse, Danny pulled on the brake. "Start loading," he ordered.

Caught by surprise, his men stood crowding the entrance, then with one accord a shout rose until it filled the warehouse with the deep, exultant roar of voices hailing a new leader. Slowly the sound died, but something of its triumphant jubilance rang in Feagan's voice as he pushed his way through the men standing there.

"Well, what are you waiting for, you muscle-bound bozos?" He picked up a coil of chain. "You heard what the boss said."

He looked at Danny, and both men coloured. It was the first time Feagan had ever called him boss, and Danny knew he had come through.

At camp the news of that fight had a better effect on the men than if Danny had doubled their wages. No question of his being one of them now. They said little within his hearing, but in the way they looked, the tone of their voices—above all, their readiness to jump at any task he set—told better than words that from now on they were with him.

And none too soon. Time was terribly precious. Each day counted heavily in that race for logs and still more logs before the coming of the cargo boats. But in even a more vital sense Danny knew that it was a race between Trent and himself. Just where or how Mellett would strike, he made no effort to find out, but of one thing he was sure—from now on Trent's active enmity was a factor he would have to deal with.

This sense of inevitable conflict, and of forces gathering for a final test of strength pervaded the camp until its feverish contagion caught each man, from Feagan to the smallest water boy.

But above all they needed rain. Overstaying its time, the dry season lingered on; each afternoon clouds piled high above the foothills, and thunder rumbled, but no

drop fell. The marshes dried as they had not dried for years; great cracks opened in the sun-baked earth, water holes disappeared, and nightly the jungle creatures travelled for miles down to the dwindling river. Each morning Danny's first thought was of rain, his first glance toward the foothills sky. The upper tributaries of Lost River were almost empty, and rain was needed to float the logs down to the main stream, where Feagan waited impatiently to begin work on his booms.

"A swell country!" the woods boss grumbled. "One day your trucks bog to the hubs in mud, and next day the creeks are dusty. Always too much or not enough—like a woman."

But they worked doggedly on. The ring of the axe, the high whirring of the saws started before dawn. Deeper and deeper into the forest the cutters made their way, and from out the mahogany groves would come the shouted warning, *"Cuidado!"* then a crack of splintering wood fibre, a rush of leaves, and the deep, unforgettable thunder of a falling giant. Barely did the tree strike the earth before Feagan's axemen began working their way along the prostrate trunk, lopping it clear of branches, and last of all came the long two-man saws, powdering the ground with red sawdust as they cut the tree into logs.

Down along the river banks the piles of mahogany grew higher, and Feagan, on his rounds, counted them as a miser counts hoarded gold. Clear, unblemished logs, outcome of centuries of nature's slow accretion, the very cream of the jungle's harvesting. No one—not even Feagan—had looked on better.

And for the time being, Danny's men were left to work in peace. Since the day of the fight, they had been unmolested, even in Bajo, and the story of that fight had spread like fire before the wind. Up and down the coast, out on the farthest coffee plantations, wherever men gathered, they told the tale of Trent's defeat and the smashing of the warehouse door. And from it rose a sense of a new personality emerging, a new force—the coming of a man. So Danny and his men were left alone.

Danny himself credited O'Hearn with responsibility for the changed attitude in Bajo. The doctor was a power

for good in that turbulent little village, and he made no secret of the fact that Danny Gayforth was his friend. A close intimacy had sprung up between the two men, for with the fever season they saw each other more often. There were days when as many as a dozen of Danny's workers fell victim to the swift onrush of fever that laid them in their hammocks for three days, and left them weak and listless for as many more.

Late one afternoon, when O'Hearn and Danny sat smoking, the doctor said, "I saw Dona Andra this morning. She has a touch of fever, and she treats it with her own prescription—cigarettes and Scotch whisky."

Danny asked, "What do you make of Andra Mellett, doctor?"

"Make of her?" O'Hearn spread out his hands. "There is between us a kind of understanding, but not overmuch do we trust each other. Andra is the kind of woman I should dislike equally to have love me or hate me."

Danny smiled. "Feagan says she has too much horsepower for her chassis." Then his eyes grew serious. "He believes Andra was behind the theft of the pay roll."

O'Hearn gave a murmur of disbelief. "*Madre Dios*! But your Feagan dislikes all women."

"I know. And Andra in particular. Just the same, he told me a queer tale of following the tracks of those two thieves down to where they took the *cayuca*. The footprints of one were very small, and the steps very short."

"Many men have small feet, *amigo*."

"But these toed out. Do many peons do that?"

O'Hearn was silent. "Why would Dona Andra rob you?"

"To put me in a hole and make me come to her for help."

Thoughtfully O'Hearn smoked. "I doubt it," he said at last. "I really think she likes you, Danny. But Andra is one of those who would move the universe and change the Good God himself to get what they want. You may have the misfortune to be what she wants."

"You make her sound spiderish."

"Perhaps. After all, one does not solve the Andras of

the world in terms of good and bad. To her those terms have no meaning. She would cut the whole tree down to get one red apple. People like that, *amigo*, make history —but at the expense of human lives." He looked at his watch. "To-morrow I shall come back and look over your sick men—or if I cannot come, I shall send Faith." O'Hearn pried his bulging form loose from the chair. "Faith seems to be the only woman your highly embellished Mr. Feagan will allow in camp."

There was good reason for Feagan's capitulation. Ten days earlier fever had struck the woods boss with its customary suddenness, and Faith had nursed him. His swift recovery was probably due to an indestructible constitution, but Feagan chose to believe it was Faith's care, and from that day on, the big Irishman's subjugation was complete.

Feagan was not alone. So far as the men were concerned, Faith could have anything she wanted in Danny's camp. Everyone knew the story of her journey for the pay roll, and scarcely a man, white, Indian or breed, had not received some kindness at her hands.

Once Danny asked her, "What does that fire-breathing father of yours say when you come up here?"

She smiled. "You and your camp are two things we don't talk about."

"Has he ever spoken of your trip to the bank for me?"

"Not once. But he hasn't forgotten."

"Neither have I." Danny's eyes darkened in retrospect. "I won't ever forget that night. It was my all-time low. Just one thing kept me going—your help. I couldn't —I mean, there aren't words—" He saw how badly he was stumbling and gave a quick, self-conscious laugh. "What I'm trying to say is I'm everlastingly grateful, and if ever you need a blood transfusion or somebody done in, just call on me."

But to Danny, in spite of their deepening friendship, Faith still remained enigmatic. She had a disconcerting way of smiling at him, a manner that made him feel very young and left him silently resentful, without knowing why. There were times, too, when he caught himself remembering the closeness of her on that night of fever,

and her arms about him, holding him as a mother might hold an ailing child. But now, the fever past, she had withdrawn into herself, veiled by a screen of easy, friendly companionship.

CHAPTER TWENTY

It was not always effective, that screen. Once—she was standing beside him in the office while he bent over a tracing—his face brushed her arm, and like the snap of an electric spark that accidental touch evoked the old disturbing sense of acute awareness at her presence, amounting almost to pain.

Heart racing, he laid his cheek against the thin material of her blouse, and for a stolen instant felt the warmth of her. He knew her slanting eyes were on him, but he would not look up until slowly she drew her arm away.

"Fever again, Danny?" She half-smiled.

"Put your hand on my forehead and see."

But she did not accept the challenge.

Not all of this was lost on Feagan. To Danny's intense annoyance, the woods boss assumed an air of profound insight whenever Faith was mentioned until Danny burst out at last, "No one in the world could be as wise as you look. You ought to help Starling write a book."

"Not me," Feagan grinned. "I'm collectin' dope for one for myself. It's all about a bird—"

"A bird?"

"Yeah. An ostrich."

Danny felt his face warming. "If we weren't so busy, I'd fire you," he fumed feebly, and Feagan walked off, whistling.

Meanwhile, work was swinging into its final stage—the long awaited moment was at hand when they could start two of their largest crews building the booms. Feagan had decided there should be two booms in the upper river, and with scrupulous care he began hauling the biggest, straightest logs to the landing, then rolled them, with a splash of yellow water, down the steep bank. There a

gang of half-naked river men swarmed over them, securing the logs end to end with enormous steel spikes and chains, until each boom looked like the necklace of some mythical giant. Ends fastened to the banks, those circles of chained logs lay half submerged in shallow water, inviting greedy-eyed alligators to sun themselves, and as the days passed, thousands of feet of mahogany began pouring in, to be held within the booms ready for the coming of the boats.

But still it would not rain. Feagan began to show signs of wear, for the booms were nearly filled with logs, the cargo boats might come at any time, and without more water they could not hope to get in with launches and tow the booms down to the lagoon. Except when high tides from the sea drove salt water up between its narrow banks, Lost River had shrunk to a sluggish stream.

"Damn a river that flows both ways," Feagan grumbled to Danny. "Last night I got to thinking what happens if the rains come and the booms get caught between a flood from above and a high tide sweeping in from the ocean."

"You do think of the pleasantest things," Danny answered.

"Somebody has to. At first I figured on filling the booms with logs, towing 'em down to the lagoon, and holding them there. But that's taking too much of a chance in case of storm. So I'm going to hold 'em up above in the river and pray for rain. When the boats get in, we'll tow them down on an ebb tide." Feagan scratched his head. "You know, I've never logged just this way."

Danny laughed. "Neither have I." Then, at a low growl from Feagan, he looked up. "What goes?"

"Visiting day." Feagan jerked a disgusted finger up the river. "Here comes smouldering beauty—I'll just run over and lock the safe."

Following Feagan's gesture, Danny saw Andra Mellett coming around the bend in her launch. The wind blew her pale yellow hair about her eyes, and with one hand she patted it down; then, catching sight of Danny, she waved, and by some obscure trick of memory, Danny

saw her as she had stood in the doorway of Starling's hacienda the first time they met.

They had come a long way since then, over paths that each day led apart, and he wondered if the fault was his or hers, or part of life's inevitability.

Feagan had lumbered off in the direction of the men's quarters, and when the launch touched the dock, Danny lifted her up beside him. She smoothed her dress. "Remember me? I'm the sister of your little sparring partner."

"How is he?"

"Do you care?"

"Not much."

She cast a swiftly searching look at him. "Danny, you're getting hard. There's something steely about you that wasn't there before. Alfredo says the day you fought with Trent you were like an animal."

"You can thank Trent for that."

She nodded. "Yes, I think so." Again she patted down her hair. "Well, let's not talk about fighting. Let's talk about you and me and to-morrow."

Eager for a less dangerous footing, he said, "While you were coming in, I thought of the first time we saw each other."

She smiled at the memory. "You were all alone, defying the world—Horatio at the bridge. Everybody was glaring at you, and your freckled face was very stern. I remember liking you." She stopped. "Well, whatever happens, I take credit for being the first to realize you couldn't be pushed around. That was Trent's big mistake." She looked out over the river and frowned. "Trent makes too many mistakes."

There was a weariness in her voice that made him ask, "Tired?"

"Doctor O'Hearn says I smoke too much, drink too many highballs, and fuss too much. In other words, I don't know how to live." Reaching up to his pocket, she took out a cigarette, and lighting it, inhaled, then with her shoe she began tracing circles in the dust while he waited, knowing he would soon learn why she had come.

But when she did speak, it brought him a sense of

shock. "Danny"—the words came in quick staccato—"I need you."

"What's wrong?"

"Trent. He thinks I'm in love with you."

Danny smiled. "Did you tell him he's crazy?"

"No. Why should I?"

Their eyes met and held. He saw her pupils grow larger while the silence lengthened, and he had the old, uncomfortable feeling of always being on the defensive with her.

With the tip of her tongue, she moistened her lips. "Danny, I'm at the end of my rope with Trent. He's getting out of hand, and I'm afraid."

"For him or me?"

"For you. He hates you. He's obsessed. I can't be sure he won't do something foolish, unless you—" she hesitated. "Unless you act sensibly."

"You mean about Starling's land?"

"Yes. You could stop all this stupid war."

He shook his head. "Andra, even if I wanted to, Trent and I could never work together. And I don't want to. I just don't like the idea of running off with Starling's land."

"You're not much of a realist, are you, Danny? Anthony Starling—"

"I know. You're going to tell me he's my enemy, and a selfish, headstrong obstacle to progress, and I can agree with all that. But—"

"But"—it was Andra's turn to interrupt—"he's Faith Starling's father, and that's that." There was a scornful pity in her voice that made him flush.

"Faith has nothing to do with it."

"Don't squirm, Danny. I've seen Trent go all through this when Faith turns on the charm." Andra's voice was sharpening. "These soft, feminine women take you men in every time, and it's all so cheap and obvious I want to scream. Even now, even when I mention her name, I can see your eyes change. I've seen that same look in Trent's eyes. Why can't you both realize you're not fighting about land or rubber or mahogany? You're fighting about Faith Starling." With a strong effort she curbed her rising anger.

He watched until some measure of calm returned, then he said, "You'll have to count me out, Andra."

Visibly she seemed to withdraw from him. "Do you think you're being very wise? Trent can be a powerful friend—and a powerful enemy."

"Threatening me, Andra?"

"Let's never talk of threats, you and I." She laid both hands on his shoulders. "I could shake you, Danny. You're being wilfully stubborn and blind, and we both—"

Her hands tightened, and her voice fell. "Danny, if it's the idea of working with Trent that makes it impossible for you, we can drop him."

Danny stiffened. "You're pretty cold-blooded, do you know that?"

"I can be perfectly cold-blooded. So can you. You have been with me." He felt again the pressure of her hands. "Danny, what's gone wrong between us?" It was the cry of a soul adrift.

"You won't accept people as human beings," Danny answered. "You always want to make them a means to an end, just as you have me. You'll never be happy until—"

A twig snapped, and turning, they saw Faith riding toward them. Very leisurely Andra dropped her hands from Danny's shoulders.

Her own eyes steely, Faith reined in her horse. "I see Andra has beaten me with the news."

Danny lifted her from the saddle. "What news?"

"Didn't Andra tell you? Bardi had word that your cargo boats will be in to-morrow night, and Mr. Peters is on one."

Danny looked at Andra—he was beginning to understand. "You didn't want me to know that, did you? Not until you had one more try."

Andra's eyes were kindling, and quietly Faith asked, "Haven't you told him, Andra?"

Andra laughed. "Was there any need? I knew you couldn't miss the chance, now that you've transferred your deep, undying devotion from Trent." She was fighting, not very successfully, to keep her anger down.

Faith seemed to study her. "My devotion to Trent has always worried you, hasn't it, Andra? But it shouldn't. You'll keep your little clutching hands on him as long as you live."

"And how you hate me for it!"

"I hate to see a life ruined." She spoke slowly, quietly. "I've watched you in the six years you've been here, and I've watched Trent. I've seen you kill every decent, generous impulse he ever had. You've goaded and bullied until only the worst of him is left. You've resented every friendship he made—mine most of all. I've known how you lied to him about me because you were afraid of me. And it hasn't only been Trent. I've seen you turn Alfredo Bardi into an abject tool, just because you thought he could be useful. All this hasn't been pretty to look at, but it had its lesson."

The coolly detached voice cut like a scalpel. Patches of red stood out on Andra's cheeks, and watching them, Danny realized that these two women were opposite as the poles. But he was seeing one aspect of Faith he had not known existed—she could give blow for blow.

Lashed to white-hot anger, Andra's eyes passed from Faith's bare legs to the low *huipil* that half-revealed the full curve of her breast. "You professional female!" She was panting. "You don't have to be intelligent—just obvious and lush. Your one game is to make men feel the woman in you."

"If men feel the woman in me, I don't use it to turn them into flunkeys."

"No, you use it to cheat them. Like the shabby trick you played on Danny."

"It *was* a shabby trick," Faith answered. "I've regretted it often. The difference between us is that your whole life has been a tissue of shabby tricks." With an effort Faith checked herself. "But what's the use of all this, Andra? You know yourself better than I do."

Turning, she led her horse toward camp.

Andra stood looking after her, both hands clenched; then her smouldering eyes moved to the man before her.

"Danny"—she made a supreme effort to be calm—"I've got to talk to you before Peters' boat gets in. We

can't do it now with that—with Faith underfoot. But please don't close your mind to the biggest chance you and I may ever have. I'll come up to-morrow, early."

And as if to keep him from answering, she jumped into the launch and shoved it out into midstream.

Faith's cheeks were still glowing when Danny caught up with her, and at her look of guilt he laughed.

"You swing a mean left, Miss Starling."

"Ashamed of me?" Her voice was as abashed as her eyes.

He laughed again. "Your father could have done a more thorough job."

"So could I. There were lots more things I could have said. I wanted to, but spats like that are silly—especially in this country, where you have to see people again and again." She was frowning. "Ever seen me in a really foul humour?"

"No."

"Well, I am to-day. For one thing, I'm dead. Carlos and I were up all night at the hospital." Abruptly she changed the subject. "Aren't you astonished at Rod Peters' coming back?"

"I should have guessed it. Rod always had a way of dropping in just as hell starts to pop."

"You mean Trent?"

He nodded. "And maybe Andra, too. I have a strong hunch it won't be long before we get action."

A dull rumble from the foothills made him raise his head, and he saw the sky had clouded. Once again, this time closer, came the roll of thunder. He looked at Faith. "Rain at last?"

"It's raining in the foothills now." She gave a sigh of weary relief. "That means the fever season's over. To-morrow I sleep all day long."

With terrifying swiftness, the clouds were sweeping toward them, and now another clap of thunder rocked the earth.

"Does the rainy season always start with a riot?" he asked.

"Sometimes it starts with a cloudburst."

"That would just about ruin Feagan. We've got both

the upper booms jammed with logs." He looked dubiously at the black horizon. "Which way are you bound?"

"Up the river trail. Father's opening a pyramid."

"I'll ride with you and see how things look along the river."

A twilight dusk had fallen when they entered the jungle but not until they reached the ruins did they hear the first soft whisper of rain. No drops touched the ground yet, so thick was the leafy canopy above them, but the smell of it was in Danny's nostrils, and a restless stirring in the air.

Then even that ceased. The deep artillery of thunder stopped abruptly, and silence filled the jungle; a vast, uneasy silence, its quick contagion reaching the two riders. No rustle of leaf or sound of bird; it was as if all nature waited, hushed in mute expectancy; then with a shriek of wind and a crack of thunder the storm was on them.

Faith turned in the saddle. "It's going to blow," she called. "This is no place for us. Follow me." She touched the horse with her heel.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

RIDING behind her, Danny heard the trees begin to creak, and somewhere to the left a branch splintered to the ground. He felt his horse flinch with fright, and saw Faith bend low over the neck of her own animal, calming him with the sound of her voice. Racing down the trail, they clattered out upon a wide clearing, where a temple stood, covered with the debris of ages, and beyond it Danny caught a glimpse of the river.

They dismounted and led their horses into a broad tunnel at the base of the temple. Signs of recent digging told Danny that Starling had been excavating, and in the gloom of the tunnel they left their steaming, still trembling horses, then walked back to the entrance.

"Look." Faith touched his arm.

An unforgettable sight out there, wildly magnificent in

its very violence. Downstream the sky was still bright—they were on the lower fringe of the clouds—but across the river the whole jungle world was caught up in the fierce turbulence of the storm. Spear after jagged spear of lightning split the black skies of the foothills; trees were bending like grass beneath the gale, and before the tunnel entrance the air was filled with branches and torn leaves.

As Danny watched, a surging response rose within him to that mighty unleashing of elements, a sense of sharing in this primordial power, this giver of life—the rains. Beside him in the dimness of the narrow entrance, he saw Faith breathe in the fresh, moist smell of grateful earth, and saw her eyes glisten as if she, too, gloried in the irresistible power of the storm.

Once, as the lightning cracked, he caught a brief, vivid glimpse of ancient carvings on the tunnel walls behind him—a procession of priests in bas relief, and a great fanged serpent, its plumed coils undulating back into the darkness. He thought of that other temple in the Cave of the Bats, guarded by these same grotesque devices, hidden and undisturbed down the centuries, and for a second it was as if this mysterious world of yesterday had come alive, merging itself with the present, casting its own ghostly influence across the portals of the living.

With face upturned to wind and rain, Faith stood looking out, while Danny watched the long line of her throat, and her skin, bronzed like some rarely precious surface. The wind, veering, drove a fine mist in upon them, and he saw the gleam of a million silvery droplets in her hair. He laid his hand on the soft, wet thickness of it, and she looked suddenly up at him, so close he caught the perfume of her, and desire swept him to reach out and touch her. He managed to speak.

"Frightened?"

"Oh, no! Excited. Storms always excite me. Look—that lightning. It's like a world on fire."

But he did not look. His eyes never left her, while slowly raising her arms she passed both hands through her wet hair, pushing it back over her neck until the

wide sleeve of the *huipil* fell to her shoulders, baring the soft curve of her arms—arms that had held him through his black hour of fever and defeat.

"Faith!" That half-whispered word trembled down the long passage, evoking the ghost of an echo from the inner darkness. She had gone very still, her face a dim triangle in the dusk, where only her eyes were luminous.

"Faith!" No whisper now. It was a call. His arms were about her, his hands roughly sweeping the thin fabric of the *huipil*, with a strength that held her too close to speak, until he felt the miracle of her body rising to meet his, and two arms clasped about his shoulders. With a low cry of exultation his lips closed on her lips.

Blue-white against the sky a bolt of lightning cracked across the clearing, a splintered tree thundered to earth, but within the shadowy tunnel those two made no move. Time had stopped. Caught in an ecstasy that knew neither time nor space, he held her, conscious only of the throbbing of his heart, the softness of her lips, and the piercing closeness of her body.

Slowly the world became reality again, and he knew that she had raised his face from hers. Both hands were on his cheeks, and she was looking up at him, smiling with lips and eyes, while outside, through jagged clouds, a solitary shaft of sunlight was bathing the jungle world in brightness.

Like a long caress her eyes passed over his face, lingering, as if to fix within her memory for all the days to come this one transcendant fragment of eternity. Then, with a little cry, she pulled his face down to hers and kissed him, covering his eyes and lips and cheeks with a shower of kisses, swift and blindingly sweet. Breathless, she released him.

The rain had stopped. Spirals of steam were rising from the river, and a slanting sun brought back colour to the jungle. Standing beside her, neither touching her nor speaking, Danny watched, while about them the light grew stronger, and at last he spoke.

"I wanted to do this months ago. You knew it too, but you kept me from you—you were always on guard. Why, Faith?"

"I didn't want to love you, Danny. It meant tearing myself apart between you and Father. It means that now."

"And—you're not sorry?"

"Sorry? I'm terribly glad—so glad and happy you'll never know."

He laid a finger on her mouth. "Just say you love me—just tell me that."

And with her lips, but without words, she told him.

The sun was dropping behind the jungle as Danny helped her into the saddle, and, one hand still on his shoulder, she looked down.

"When I tell Father I'm in love with that unspeakable fly-by-night whippersnapper, what happens?"

"An earthquake," he laughed. "But what about me? I've got Feagan to face."

She watched him ride down the river trail; then made her way up to the pyramid where her father's men were digging.

Anthony Starling was in high good humour. Faith found him seated on a mound of earth, vigorously scrubbing a sculptured slab, and at sight of her he chuckled.

"Looks like things are going to happen." He made a place for her beside him, and she wondered if he could hear the beating of her heart.

"What things?" she asked absently.

"Trent. Saw him this morning. He's still lathered up about the beating he got from that mahogany tramp." Critically Starling examined the slab. "Fourth century, and no damned good." He put it aside. "Surprising how people hold grudges. It was a fair fight, from all I hear, and Trent got the worst of it. I never thought that what's-his-name—Gaylord—"

"Gayforth, Father."

"—Gayforth had it in him."

She laid her hand on his great hairy paw. "Do you mean you like Danny a little better, Father?"

Anthony snorted. "You sound like Dabs. I don't bother about him, one way or the other, as long as he keeps out of my way."

"What did Trent want?"

"Oh—" Picking up the slab, he began scrubbing again with an air of elaborate casualness, but Faith persisted.

"Dear, stop stalling. What is Trent up to?"

"Same old scheme of running the mahogany gang out of the country." Again Anthony chuckled. "Trent's trouble is he hasn't miners enough to get away with it, and he wanted me to help. I told him I hadn't time to turn my crews into a punitive expedition."

"Was he angry?"

"Well, he wasn't pleased. He implied you had talked me over to Gaylord's side. Which is silly."

She kissed him. "I'm awfully glad you didn't join with Trent against Danny."

"Well, after all—" Anthony's eyebrows shot together. "Why are you so glad?"

For a second she hesitated. "Because I love him."

"You what! Say that again." He leaned over her, his lip thrust out, but she answered, clear-eyed and calm:

"I love him, Father."

Starling drew a deep, whistling breath. "Now by every eternal—!" Speechless, beyond the ministry of words, he could only stand there towering over her.

Very quietly Faith spoke. "Father, you can't bully me. Don't you know that by now?"

"Bully you! I'll close up the hacienda. I'll take you away until you get your senses back. You can't make an utter fool of yourself. I won't—" Rage once more obliterated all sound except a growl.

She waited until the seizure passed, then, gently, as if she were speaking to a child, she said. "Father, we're not back in Maya times. This is to-day. We're two grown people, and neither of us owns the other. Can't we talk this out like rational beings? We've been more than father and daughter, you and I. We've been companions and partners. Don't spoil it now. Please don't make me choose between you and Danny—the two people I love most in the world."

"You've made your choice already."

Desolately she saw he was insulating himself against her. "Listen, Father!" Her voice was still pleading. "When Danny first came here I saw that you and he

were bound to quarrel, and I took your side, even against what I knew was right and just. And through it all he's been gentle and fine and courageous. He's suffered at your hands and at Trent's, and it hasn't made him bitter."

"That bivalve hasn't brains enough to be bitter."

She made one last effort. "Father, I've heard you say often that after you fell in love with Mother you wouldn't let anyone come between you as long as she lived. Can't you see it's the same with me now? I didn't want this to happen. But it has happened. Don't make me pay the price of your love."

He whirled on her. "Suppose I do?"

She did not hesitate. "If you make me, I'll pay even that."

Still clutching the Mayan slab, he moved slowly toward her; his great bearlike figure bulking bigger than human in the gathering dusk, his face dark with blood. "You've said enough." He waited for self-control before he could go on. "Now you listen to me. You'll give him up, or by God I'll do what Trent wants. I'll let him have every man I've got to help run Gayforth out of the country. Do you think we can't?"

"I think you can, the two of you. But if you do, I'll go with Danny."

In a gesture of uncontrollable passion Anthony hurled the slab against a rock, splitting it to fragments. "Go with him now," he choked. "Don't come back to the hacienda, I never want to see you again."

She did not answer; they had reached the end. Eyes wet with tears, she turned away.

Two others, a sister and brother, quarrelled over Danny before that night was through. Up in the Mellett hacienda, Trent had returned from Bajo and found Andra waiting on the porch.

He saw at once that something had angered her, and when she told him of her talk with Gayforth, he listened quietly, a glint of vindictive amusement in his eyes. At the end he laughed. "Well, I hope you're satisfied. You

fell for him and he used you. Why not admit it? He had you eating out of his hand. Everything that has happened goes back to the day you made me hold off because you had so much better plans."

Andra crushed her cigarette stub; her voice held a thin, dangerous weariness. "I'm a little tired of you to-night, Trent—a little tired of all men—and I'm especially tired of your eternal refrain. I made you hold off because we all agreed he hadn't a chance to succeed. The more work he did, the more camps he built, the more mahogany he cut, the better for us when the time came to buy him out."

Trent's mouth twitched. "That was your story, little sister. But it doesn't go down. What you realiy wanted was to make another trained seal of him, like you did Bardi—and when you couldn't, you went off the deep end. You let him string you along for weeks while he and Feagan kept on cutting, until now they have a cargo of hand-picked mahogany waiting for the boats to-morrow. They're sitting pretty, and all because you—"

"Must we go through that again?" She gazed out into the darkness. "Even now we might—"

"Might! Andra, why in the name of God won't you look at the truth?" In spite of his anger, there was triumph in Trent's voice. "He's turned your scheme down. Turned little sister down, with all her big ideas. Can't you face it? Danny Gayforth doesn't want to work with you."

"I am facing it. I haven't enjoyed it, but I am facing it. There's very little you can tell me about myself, Trent, that I don't already know. You're not exactly a mental giant, and there's just a chance that to-morrow may make him change his mind."

"You think so?" His eyes were glinting. "Maybe you better get Faith to use her influence."

Something in his voice awakened fear in her. "What are you trying to say?"

Again he laughed. "You're not going on like this. To-day Faith had a hell of a row with her father over Gayforth."

"Who told you?"

"The old goat himself. Faith informed him that she's in love with Gayforth, and Anthony blew up. She's staying down at O'Hearn's—"

Trent looked into his sister's eyes and stopped, aghast. "Good Lord, Andra!"

Quickly she swerved away from him. The heavy silence grew longer, while she kept her face resolutely turned to the darkness, and Mellett moved aimlessly about the room.

"Cigarette, Trent." The voice was absolutely expressionless.

He came toward her. They did not speak, but he saw the pale mask of her face, and his hand, holding the lighter, was not quite steady. "Sorry, old girl, I didn't know." He lit her cigarette.

"Skip it." Deeply she inhaled. "Trent, you were right and I was wrong." The lips scarcely moved. "Now that Faith has added another scalp—"

"Don't bring Faith into this." For a fleeting second regret touched the man's eyes to sincerity. "She's worth all of us put together."

"You're so noble," the flat voice goaded.

Stung as by the lash of a whip, he flung out at her. "To hell with all that. I'm ready to go ahead without your filthy prodding." He moved closer. "Bardi and I talked to-day. It might not be too late yet to keep Gayforth's logs from reaching the boats."

"How?"

"That rain in the foothills means flood water. Suppose both of his booms are cut to-night? Those logs would be scattered the length of the Central American coast."

She listened, and for once her foot ceased its tapping. "Who would cut the booms?"

"Alfredo and I."

She laid an ice-cold finger on his hand. "I'll come with you."

"Why?"

Eyes brooding into the darkness, she spoke as one might speak out of deep slumber. "I want to see those

logs come floating out of the booms. I want to see them draining away like blood."

Half fascinated, half repelled, he watched her. "What a sweet, gentle little sister it is!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

UP in the mahogany camp that night, Danny slept fitfully. Thunder still rumbled from the foothills, and the voice of the river was deepening with every passing hour. Long before daylight he heard Feagan moving about the office and, slipping into his clothes, joined him.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"That river. I've got both booms well anchored, but there's an awful bunch of flood water on the way. Thought I'd take a couple of men and have a looksee at the lower boom. Better come along."

It was the black hour before dawn as they hurried through the jungle—Danny, Feagan, and three of their best river men, lighting the trail with their flashlights. They could see that the river had swollen; a yellow line of frothy foam was licking at the banks, and as Danny threw his light out over the water, an uprooted ceiba tree floated slowly past.

Curiously Danny watched it. "That ceiba is moving upstream," he said.

"Sure." Feagan nodded. "The tide from the sea is beginning to back the water up. Wait until that tide starts out and the flood water comes down on top of it—then you'll see something. If Peters' cargo boats are getting in to-night, we better tow the booms down as soon as it's light." Remembering his prayers for rain, the woods boss frowned. "I could of done nicely with less water."

In an hour they reached the lower boom. Grating and rumbling, rising and falling with the churning of the river, the captive logs moved restlessly, and Danny flashed his beam on the anchor logs that held the boom

itself to shore. He heard Feagan breathe a sigh of relief —all tight and secure.

Sliding down the bank, they started out over the boom logs, examining the chains and spikes that fastened them.

"No danger of these not holding," Danny shouted above the din.

"I've seen bigger ones than this pull loose," Feagan called back; then with a gasp he threw the light ahead of him and motioned Danny to his side. Out beyond the boom a solid mass of logs was drifting, and Danny saw that just ahead a section of the boom had parted. The upper end floated upstream, and fully half the logs had crowded through the opening, jostling their way into the channel, sucked out by the current.

Kneeling, the two men bent over the boom log, and as their lights fell upon its wet surface, Feagan cursed beneath his breath—the spikes that held the chains had been hacked loose with an axe. No force of current or weakness of the chain links was to blame—the boom had been deliberately cut.

For a second the hopelessness of any action held Danny numb. Futile to think of repairing the boom, for with the force of those escaping logs jamming the outlet, not all the men in camp could draw the severed ends together. He looked out over the water and, grasping at a slender hope, called to Feagan. "Those logs are moving upstream. The tide will drive them up the river."

Sombrely Feagan nodded. "It will for a while. But when the tide turns—what then?"

Danny did not answer. Only a question of hours—five or six at most—when those same logs would come swirling down the river and out to sea. Once across the bar, they would be beyond the power of man ever to bring back. Peters and his boats would be just in time to see half their cargo lost.

Half the cargo! In sudden fear Danny grasped Feagan's arm. *"The upper boom!"*

Feagan whirled in his tracks. Together they ran back to the bank and, followed by their men, struck out through the jungle. Danny in the lead, they scrambled up the narrow trail, made even more precarious by the

recent rains. Roots tripped them, they slipped on the wet clay, and twice Feagan fell headlong, not even able to curse for lack of breath. Their faces were grey with anxiety, but they stumbled on.

Behind him Danny could hear the men breathing hard, and their footsteps sloshing through the mud—they were coming to the last turn. Suddenly he stopped short, switched off his light, and gave a low call of warning.

Out in midstream, faintly seen against the black water, was the misty outline of a launch, a solitary lantern burning in its bow. The motor was idling, the boat itself had been made fast to one of the boom logs, and as the men crowded up behind him Danny heard the sharp, staccato blow of an axe.

"They're cutting the boom!" Down the bank and out over the logs he raced, followed by Feagan. Twice more he heard the axe bite into wood, then it ceased, and on the boom log just ahead a dark-clothed figure rose, cast a single look behind him, and made for the launch. Close on his heels, gaining with every step, Danny tore after him across the slippery logs. Once the man glanced over his shoulders, gave a shrill yelp of fear, and made a last wild effort to reach the boat.

But the launch itself was moving. The engine had begun turning, the stern backed away from the boom. In frantic desperation the man raised his hands. "Wait!" It was Bardi's voice. Once more over the water rose the high-pitched, terror-laden cry, "Wait!" Then on the very edge of the log he stopped and began cursing in a frenzy of rage. The launch was in midstream. He had been abandoned.

And now Danny was on him. Bardi turned like a cornered animal and drew a small automatic just as Danny struck. Beneath the shock of impact the gun dropped from his hand, and Bardi crashed down across the boom, his head striking a steel spike. With a moan he slipped into the water.

Danny pulled him out, limp and unconscious, as Feagan reached them.

"That yellow—!" Murder blazed in the big Irishman's eyes, but Danny held him back. "Carry him to shore

and tie him up," he ordered. "We're going to need this rat alive."

He hurried back to the opened boom, but even before he reached it all hope died—no chance on earth to close that widening gap and hold the logs inside. The current had already caught them, and under pressure of tons on tons of wood, logs by the hundreds began pouring into the stream like a herd of liberated wild things.

In that black moment Danny drained to its last dregs the bitter cup of defeat. He could do nothing—nothing to stop that slow, inexorable emptying of the boom. He wanted to throw himself at the logs and push them back by brute force; he wanted to cry out—anything but stand there watching them slowly sweeping past into the yellow waters. And they were logs whose equal the mahogany coast had never seen, logs he and Feagan had gathered at the cost of heartbreaking labour and sweat. And they had been so near success!

Feagan's voice steadied him. "This ends it, Boss. When the flood hits 'em, they'll scatter from here to Trinidad. We're through."

Danny did not move. He felt Feagan's calloused hand on his shoulder, while across the river dawn touched the jungle to life and the red logs floated past.

Slowly they walked back to shore. For a full minute Danny stood with eyes fixed straight before him, then he squared his shoulders. "Get both launches and tow those empty booms down the river. Don't bother about the logs. Just get the booms down. Load the truck with every man we've got and all our spikes and boom chains, and wait for me above the lagoon."

Feagan shook his head. "Look, Boss. You're a swell engineer, but nothing in God's world can hold those logs with flood water behind 'em."

"Maybe not. Maybe it's only a crazy hope. But let's try it."

And Feagan nodded assent.

As they passed Bardi, still unconscious on the bank, Danny stopped. "Take him down to O'Hearn, and have two of the boys watch him every minute. I want him in shape to talk when Peters gets here."

Feagan's face was granite as he gave the order. "And when he comes to," he told the men, "you might mention that Feagan's going to settle with him it it's his last act on earth." There was no doubting the woods boss's grim sincerity.

Danny had already climbed the bank when Feagan called after him. "Where are you off to?"

"Anthony Starling." And he was gone.

When Danny reached the hacienda, Starling, in a heavy purple bathrobe, was working at his desk but at the sight of Gayforth he pushed back his chair, and a look of malicious joy began shining in his eyes. "I thought you'd be around," the deep voice rumbled. "You must be a first-rate paranoid if you think any daughter of mine—"

"Stop it, Starling," Danny cut him off. "I didn't come to talk about Faith. We won't ever ask you what you think or what you don't think. So relax."

People did not talk in just that tone to Starling, and the effect was immediate and direct. Two great paws slammed the desk; papers, index cards, and pencils scattered themselves about the room, while the colour of Starling's face rivalled his bathrobe, and from somewhere down in that enormous chest came a roar of pure uninhibited rage.

Danny held up his hand. "Doctor Starling, I haven't time to go through all this again. Maybe it impresses you, but it doesn't impress me, and I'm busy. I came here to offer you a deal."

"A deal with you!" Starling's forefinger waved in Danny's face. "You came a little late. I made a deal last night with Trent Mellett. We're cleaning you out, understand? I have sixty men working for me who—"

"I'm glad it's that many."

"Glad! You won't be glad—"

"Yes, I will. Now do me a favour and let me talk for just two minutes, or you'll regret it the rest of your life."

Feeling very close to apoplexy, Starling could only stare—here was a ruthlessly insistent Gayforth he had never dreamed of.

Danny took advantage of the momentary silence. "Faith to'd me once you never found a Mayan temple where the robes and wood carvings and featherwork still exist."

"You young babbling ass!" Starling found his voice. "It stands to reason that five to ten centuries—"

"Wait a minute. Is it so, or isn't it?"

"Of course it's so. Any fool—"

"Hold it. I know a temple that is just the same to-day as it was the day the Mayas left it. It's a temple in perfect condition, protected from man and animals, sun and rain, a place time has forgotten."

"You're lying."

"Am I? There's a sacrificial stone in that temple covered with priest robes made of coloured feathers, and those colours aren't even faded. There are a hundred panels of different kinds of wood, carved with figures and covered with symbols."

Starling's mouth had gone lax, but still his head wagged. "You're a liar, a charlatan, and a flimsy humbug."

Picking up a pencil, Danny sketched a rough symbol of a bird. "I can remember this—it was on one of the robes."

Starling bent over the symbol. "You could have got that from one of my books."

"I've never read your books. I saw it on a robe made of little shells."

"*Shells!*" Starling bounded from his chair. "You couldn't invent that! You don't know enough." Again he hesitated, but his eyes were avid. "What kind of shells?"

"The same kind I've seen on Temple Island."

As if to himself Anthony murmured, "I always said they used shells. I've found fragments—like powder. Where is this temple?"

"On Rod Peters' land, where you'll never find it."

Tripping over his bathrobe, Anthony bore down on Danny. "You young—!" He stopped. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want your promise that from now on there will be no interference either from your men or from you."

"Well, I suppose—"

"And I want more than that. I want those sixty men of yours to work for me until midnight."

Starling's lip moved. "It's a big order."

"If you don't," Danny went on relentlessly, "I give you my solemn word I'll turn this temple over to the Smithsonian archaeologists. It's within five miles of your hacienda, and they'll steal it from under your nose. How will that be for the reputation of the great Anthony Starling?"

The face was purple again. "Smithsonian—damned pack of blundering shysters." The hand pounded with abating fury on the desk, and Starling capitulated. "I agree. Where is this temple?"

"Behind the Cave of the Bats." Rapidly Danny told of that sealed-up sanctuary, while Starling listened, his eyes ablaze.

At the end he drew a long, whistling breath. "How do I get in?"

"From the south. You can blast away the soft limestone easily." Hand on the door, Danny turned. "Remember—I need your crew at the head of the lagoon in one hour."

"You'll have them all—except three."

"What can you do with three men?"

For the first time that day Starling smiled. "Dynamite the Cave of the Bats."

In Dr. O'Hearn's little hospital on the edge of Bajo, Alfredo Bardi was showing signs of returning consciousness. For an hour O'Hearn and Faith had worked over him, while behind them, like avenging angels, stood the two guards Feagan had sent down.

"Scalp wound and perhaps mild concussion," the doctor pronounced. His big hands moved distastefully over the pale forehead. "Give me those clippers, Faith. I often wonder why physicians bother saving such vermin." His eyes rose to the watching men. "You say he cut the boom?"

"The boss and Feagan caught him red-handed."

O'Hearn glanced at Faith. "This means the end for Danny, no?"

"It will break his heart." Her eyes were blinded with a sudden flood of tears.

"I could wish—" O'Hearn stopped; Bardi's eyes were fluttering open.

"Andra!" It was a weak whisper, and the doctor leaned forward.

"Andra isn't here."

Silence; a sigh. "No." Bardi licked his lips. "She left me. They both left me." His vague eyes roamed the room, as if to confirm Andra's absence, and, catching sight of the two grimly attentive figures behind O'Hearn, he rasped hoarsely, "What do you want?"

The nearer answered, "You."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

BARDI'S eyes closed to blot out reality, then, opening, looked up at Faith. "Don't let them hurt me!" This time a note of mortal fear whined in his voice.

Briskly O'Hearn interposed. "You're a bit of an optimist, my friend. You were caught destroying the work of many months; you have probably ruined Gayforth and Peters, and now you ask them not to hurt you."

A shiver racked the scrawny body. "What will they do to me?"

O'Hearn shrugged. "*Por Dios,* I do not know. But not for all the pesos of the universe would I be in your boots to-day."

One of the guards moved forward. "Don't worry about us hurting you, Bardi. We're just preserving you for Feagan."

"Feagan wants me?"

"Kind of. He told us he has a date with you. They were his booms, you know."

Drops of sweat formed on Bardi's lip. He reached out toward Faith. "Feagan will do what you tell him. You won't let him hurt me. You're a woman."

"And a's a woman too," Faith answered. "Did she help you?"

"Andra." Bardi's voice dropped. "She left me."

Faith made a slight motion to the two guards, and they stepped back.

"Why did Andra leave you?"

A spasm twisted his face. "All she wanted was to get her brother off."

"She didn't care whether you were caught or not, did she?"

His little eyes drew tight. "She never has cared what happened to me." For a second he looked up at Faith. "You want me to talk, don't you?"

She leaned over him. "It might be better to talk to me than wait until Feagan comes. But you haven't much time."

Behind the operating table, Bardi saw the two guards standing. He squirmed and looked up at the doctor. "How bad am I hurt?"

"Not nearly as bad as you can be hurt, Alfredo, *mio*," O'Hearn answered suavely. "And haven't you been Andra's lap-dog long enough?"

The eyes flared up; a moment of silence, then Bardi turned to Faith. "If I tell you, will you keep Feagan off me?"

"I promise."

Bardi began talking. Slowly at first, then faster, while Faith and O'Hearn stood close beside him and the shadows of the two guards stretched black across the floor. And when, at last, that croaking monotone ceased, O'Hearn looked up.

"*Madre de mi alma*," he murmured. "If all this is true—"

Piled high with spikes, cant hooks, and heavy chains, Danny's trucks had stopped at the narrow neck of the river above Lost Lagoon. Here a deep bend had eaten

out the bank, forming one of those swampy backwaters that drained into the main stream by a narrow channel.

Feagan's men were already waiting for Danny on the river bank, and following his orders, the launches had towed down the broken booms. Anthony Starling, too, had kept his word. His men were gathered close to Feagan, curious and perplexed.

Climbing into one of the trucks, Danny called them in a circle about him to tell his plan.

It was simply told. At this narrow point in the river, the booms would easily stretch from bank to bank. The end of one boom was to be made fast just above the channel that led to the backwater, then with the two launches the men would pull the other end across the river, and as far upstream as the boom would stretch, forming a barricade set at a sharp angle to the current.

That barricade was the first line of defence, and against it the main strength of the flood would spend its violence. When the logs came pouring down the river, most of them would be forced over the first boom, but just below the channel entrance they would string a second, parallel boom, and from it the fight would be waged. If that second boom held, the force of the current itself would shunt the logs down towards the backwater, and with the help of nearly two hundred men, would drive the logs into the narrow channel and hold them there.

So Danny outlined his plan, but from a lifetime's experience, Feagan shook his head. "No boom on earth will hold those logs with a flood behind 'em."

"I know it. I'm counting on the strength of the tide to help neutralize that flood. The tide will be at its height in two hours.

"Even so, when those logs pile up against the first boom, it's going to snap like a piece of rotten twine."

"It will if it's tight," Danny agreed. "And that's just what we have to prevent. We'll chain the upper end of the boom to the two trucks. When the logs start hitting, let it give way a little, just enough to ease the strain. Then start the trucks, and pull it taut. The tide itself will help straighten it."

Feagan was still sceptical. "Suppose it does hold. Your logs will spill over."

"They'll spill over the first boom. When they hit the second, their speed will be killed, and we'll start them moving down the boom to the backwater. Starling's crew can keep the entrance clear."

From the truck Danny looked down into that circle of grave, upturned faces, and in spite of his anxiety a thrill of pride seized him. These were his men, willing to follow where he led with the same unquestioning trust they had given Peters. There was a new ring in his voice as he ended, "Boys, Rod Peters is coming to get those logs. If we don't save them for him, he's done—and so are we. It's a long shot, and dangerous work, but it's our only chance. We've worked like dogs for months, and we won't give up without one more fight. It may be our last —let's make it a good one."

A shout answered him, then each man turned away to make ready. Little time to lose. A strong tide was flowing in from the lagoon, and, sending a *cayuca* upstream to warn of the coming of flood waters, Danny armed the men with pike poles and with the aid of trucks and launches began laying the first boom across the river. More than once he thanked his gods that into those booms had gone Feagan's strongest, straightest logs, but even then they looked pitifully fragile as they stretched their length across the river.

With steel chains they made fast the lower end to four giant ceiba trees, and the upper end they snubbed about a mahogany stump, and lashed to the two trucks. While the men worked, Danny went out over the boom with Feagan, examining every log, driving more spikes where they were most needed, reinforcing every link that looked worn. And as they worked, they cast anxious glances upstream, conscious that the tug of the water was growing stronger, the chains were beginning to creak restlessly and little whirlpools were gathering about the ends of the logs. An hour later the lower boom swung into place, parallel to the first, but fifty yards downstream.

Feagan drew a deep breath. "Now let 'em come."

"Watch the men." Danny cautioned. "Keep a *cayuca*

tied below the booms in case some of the boys get swept off. It's going to be bad business swimming in a river full of logs."

Feagan nodded. "I'll send down for O'Hearn—just in case."

A shout from the bank; men were pointing up the river, and Danny saw the *cayuca* swerve wildly around the bend—the moment had come!

His hand closed on Feagan's arm. "You take charge of the trucks. Let the boom give way enough to ease off that first shock; then straighten it out—and luck!"

An instant their eyes held, then Feagan went up to his trucks, and Danny called every man to the lower boom. There, with racing heart, he waited.

Not long to wait. Dotted with dirty froth, a low yellow wave swept around the bend, dully roaring, as if the river had raised its voice in anger, and high on the crest of the water rode a solitary log—the vanguard. Then Danny's heart stopped. Just behind the crest of the wave a solid mass of great, churning logs was bearing down on them—tons on tons of wood, driven by the unleashed force of the flood, menacing and awful, grinding their way between the foaming banks.

One of Danny's men made a hasty sign of the cross. "*Por Dios*!" he breathed. "This is death itself." Yet every man stood firm. Fear in their eyes, they watched Danny, awaiting his word, held by the indefinable quality of leadership.

Still nearer. Far as the eye could see the river was jammed with logs from shore to shore, growling a hollow cannonade. Like some huge reptilian monster, that solid mass of red-barked wood surged closer, but it was moving more slowly now, held back by the friction of narrowing river banks, and by the one great factor Danny had counted on—the retarding influence of the incoming tide from the sea.

But those logs were coming swiftly enough. Danny cast one doubtful look at his slender, man-made barrier as with a crash the first logs struck. In a fountain of spray they recoiled; then, thrust on by the weight of wood behind, they struck again, and with a scream of

tightening chains the boom shuddered back. The whole length of it was curving dangerously, and in that second Danny shouted:

"Get going with those trucks!"

His voice was lost in the tumult of rushing waters and thundering logs, but the truck wheels were spinning, and Danny saw a slight tug on the boom. For a moment long as eternity he watched the wheels cast up dirt without an inch of progress, then—so slowly he could not be sure—the two trucks moved, and he saw the boom straighten. Skidding and jerking, the trucks were fighting their way forward.

Down on the opposite bank men were beginning to shunt logs into the backwater, but out in the centre a jam was piling up. There, Danny knew, would be the point of greatest hazard. Already dozens of logs were spilling over the upper boom, to be caught by the current and whirled down toward the last line of defence—the second boom. Here, if anywhere, the battle had to be fought, and here Danny led his men into what he knew would be the most perilous work of all.

Out over the floating logs he ran, pike pole in hand, followed by a score of men; and, aided by the crew on the boom, they began moving the logs shoreward, where Starling's men pushed them by sheer force of numbers into the safety of the backwater.

Slow work. Sometimes they failed even to gain an inch; sometimes, aided by the tide, a dozen logs would pass docilely through the narrow channel.

The sun rose higher. Men were swarming over the logs like ants, and still the barricades were holding. Twice Feagan and Danny stopped to reinforce the lower boom with extra spikes and chains. The upper they dared not venture out on—too many logs were spilling over it.

Danny wiped the sweat from his forehead and splashed his face with river water. "If those booms hold for one more hour, we'll have the logs inside the backwater. Better send some coffee and grub down from camp. I don't want a man to leave until we've got them all." He picked up his pike pole. "Any of the boys hurt?"

"Two of Starling's gang—not bad." Feagan glanced

toward the river trail. "I can't see why O'Hearn hasn't shown up. I sent for him two hours ago."

There was sufficient reason. O'Hearn and Faith had left the hospital before noon, and, since the flood made the use of a launch too dangerous, the doctor puffed after Faith along the five miles of slippery trail.

"No human being who has attained my weight and years should ever do this," he protested once as they stopped for breath. "If you loved me—"

"We'll be on the truck road in five minutes," she answered.

But even before they came to the road, they heard the steady tramp of many men, and with a premonition of danger Faith hurried forward. Moving in a compact body, Trent's miners were coming, led by Big Pete, the foreman, and at sight of those set, unsmiling faces, Faith guessed their errand.

She ran out before them. "Pete, where are you going?"

The tall foreman stopped. "Up to the mahogany camp, Miss Faith." He glanced back at his men. "We're startin' a little spring cleaning."

"I don't understand."

"I mean when Gayforth's bunch gets back from the river they won't find any camp. We're sort of aimin' to take it apart."

"What have they done, Pete?"

"They beat up Bardi last night, and tried to get Trent Mellett. To-night, when Peters' cargo crew gets in, they're fixing to gang up and jump us. So we're just beating them to the punch."

"Who told you all this?" she asked.

"Trent."

Faith's eyes sought O'Hearn's. Mellet was after a clean sweep—first to cut the booms, then, while the men were salvaging the logs, to destroy their camp.

About her the miners were crowding, curious at the interruption, and Faith's eyes passed over them. Scarcely one she did not know; many of them she and O'Hearn had tended in fever or injury. But now their faces were sullen.

Faith laid a hand on Big Pete's arm. "Pete, we've known each other for five years. Have I ever lied to you?"

He shook his head. "No, ma'am. You always been a straight shooter. But I got my orders."

"I'm not talking about that, Pete. I only want to know you believe me." She was speaking now so that all of them could hear. "How long have you worked for Trent Mellett?"

"Ever since I came out from Kansas. More'n six years—almost seven."

"And for all those years you've paid five per cent. of your wages into a pension fund, and another two per cent. for hospital care. That's a good deal of money in seven years, Pete." She looked about her at the others. "Everyone of you has done the same."

"Sure, sure." Pete nodded with growing impatience. "But what's all that got to do—"

"Everything. It tells you how much Trent's word is worth, and how much he really cares for your welfare. Pete, not one cent of your money has ever gone to a pension fund—there is no pension fund. There isn't any hospital fund. The Boston office paid all that. You've been robbed systematically for years."

Incredulous, struck silent with surprise, the men stood looking at Faith, while slowly the meaning of her words sank home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THEN O'Hearn nodded. "*Es verdad.* What the senorita speaks is true. And there is more." A little ruefully the doctor smiled. "Only this morning I learned that Trent's company has paid me four thousand dollars a year—which I have never seen."

Pete looked from Faith to O'Hearn. "I don't get it."

"It is very simple. In my case they simply forged a contract."

"Who did?"

"Trent and Bardi. Their association has been most profitable, and I imagine we shall find out more." The doctor looked about him for a place to sit down. "Your money, and my mythical salary, *amigos*, have gone into the well-lined pockets of Trent Mellett."

Not one in the crowd could doubt the doctor's story, and a rumble of voices began rising, but quieted as Faith spoke.

"Danny's men didn't attack Alfredo Bardi last night. Alfredo was hurt when he and Trent cut the booms. Bardi told us everything that I have just told you."

"What made him talk?"

O'Hearn answered, "Two of the strongest motives known to man—hate and fear. Trent left him behind on the boom last night, and when Gayforth's men caught him, Bardi saw a way to save his skin. So he talked."

"He might be lying."

"He might." O'Hearn shrugged. "But that can easily be learned. Bardi said copies of the pay rolls are kept in his safe."

"Why did Trent let Bardi in on this?"

"Someone had to certify to the correctness of the pay roll before it went to the States, and Bardi did it as an employee of the steamship company. In little matters like these, my friends, two heads are more profitable than one."

Long and searchingly Pete looked into O'Hearn's face,

then, as if to himself he muttered, "So we been suckers, have we?" He turned to his men. "Boys, we better go down and talk to Bardi."

"I expected that," O'Hearn sighed. "I will go with you."

"Why?"

"Because for the time being it seems desirable to keep Senor Bardi all in one piece."

As Trent's men turned away, O'Hearn looked after them.

"They are too silent," he said to Faith. "Men do not easily forgive to be made the fool." He touched her hand. "*Bueno,* senorita. Only the Good God knows what may happen now, but at least you have saved your Danny's camp." He looked with distaste down the muddy truck road and turned to follow Big Pete's men. "Not since I was last in love have I been so active. Tell Danny I am at the hospital if he needs me."

But when Faith reached the river, she found Danny too busy to give O'Hearn a passing thought, and what little medical aid was needed for cuts and bruises she herself provided.

Sandwiches and gallons of coffee had kept the men going throughout the day, and it was not until late afternoon that Danny threw himself at full length on the bank to look back on a job well done—the last logs were being poled into safety. They had done the impossible; they had cheated the flood, snatched victory from defeat, and they were too dog-tired even to cheer.

Stripped to the waist, Feagan crawled up the bank. His face was haggard with strain; even the seductive Venus on his shoulder seemed waterlogged and jaded, but the Irishman's big hand went clumsily around Danny's neck.

"Boss"—his voice, from shouting at the men, croaked uncertainly—"I've razzed you some about not knowin' your stuff. I just want to say right now you got everything it takes."

Weakly Danny answered, "Nuts," but his eyes were glad.

Dusk had fallen by the time they sealed the mouth of

the backwater with a double-chained boom, and, leaving forty men to guard it, Danny climbed stiffly into the truck, Faith on the driver's seat beside him.

As they drove, Danny looked to the north. A dull glow lighted the sky up the river, but soon it was hidden by jungle trees, and for the first time that day Faith found a chance to tell him of Bardi and of the meeting with Trent's men on the trail. Danny listened with frowning eyes—he knew now what Andra and Bardi had been doing with the pay roll that night in the cantina.

The lines about his jaw deepened. "Three men were hurt on that boom to-day, Faith. It was just good luck no one was killed. We might as well face the fact that Trent and I can't live in the same country—to-morrow one of us goes."

Looking at him, Faith knew that nothing she could say would change him—and in her heart she did not want him changed. Silent, apprehensive, she sat beside him while they jolted along the road to camp, and there he turned the truck over to a driver, then with tired steps followed Faith up the path to his shack. A dim light was burning inside, and as they entered Faith gave a quick start. A revolver lay on the table, and back in the shadows of the farther wall stood Andra and Trent Mellett.

Thrusting Faith behind him, Danny closed the door. At sight of Trent, all his weariness was forgotten, and he took a step toward him, then stopped—Trent had slumped into a chair, and Danny saw that his shirt was torn and bloody, and one arm hung limp.

Picking up the revolver, Danny threw it on the floor behind him. "What do you want?" he asked.

Trent did not raise his head, but Andra came forward, and Danny saw that her own face was deathly pale. "This is the one place they wouldn't look for us," she answered.

"Who?"

"Big Pete and the miners. They're after Trent. We got away through the lower shaft; I brought him here."

"And you expect me to help you?"

She would not meet his eyes, but she answered. "Yes, I suppose so." With the old gesture, she reached up and

took a cigarette from his shirt pocket. "I suppose I expect you to help me, even now."

Intently Danny watched her. Was it courage or bravado? Or was it a final desperation that led her to bring Trent to the one who had suffered most at his hands?

Danny walked to the door. "There are fifty men outside this shack who would give their shirts to know that Trent Mellett is in here. Tell me one good reason why I shouldn't call them?"

With a cry, Trent was on his feet. "You can't—" He stopped; his eyes flickered to the window, and he pointed with a trembling hand. "Look!"

That red glow in the sky was flaring brighter, and shaking, Trent sank back. "They've fired the bungalow. They'll tear me apart if you don't help us."

Andra did not even turn. "You're our only hope, Danny," she said, and her eyes were on him in quiet speculation. They were not pleading, those eyes, and Danny knew that they would never plead. Yet she was placing the fate of herself and her brother in his hands, and to Danny came the uneasy thought that perhaps she knew him better than he knew himself. He knew too that his decision was already made.

"Have you any money?" he asked.

"A little. And my jewels in this bag."

He turned to Trent. "Can you travel?"

"If I have to."

Danny opened the door and looked out—the night lay black and empty. "My launch is at the dock—take it." He spoke quietly, as if against some inner protest. "Keep in the shadow of the bank until you pass Bajo. You can catch a cargo ship at Santa Nella." Sombrely he looked at them. "And don't come back."

Without a word Trent shuffled through the door, but Andra held out her hand. "Thanks, Danny the Lion Tamer."

Their fingers barely touched, but still she stood in the doorway. "I never got you straightened out, Danny—you were my stumbling block. And I'll always remember we might have travelled a long way." Then she, too, was gone.

Danny looked guiltily at Faith. "Your dad was right," he murmured. "I lack character."

She slipped both arms about his waist. "It's best this way. They'll never come back. Too many people would be waiting for them." Thoughtfully she added, "Andra was really fond of you."

"She was fond only of herself." For a space Danny looked out into the night, then he turned. "It sounds crazy, but there's one thing more I want to do to-night—I want to see my old buddy, Doctor Starling."

She let him lead her through the door and down the trail, but misgiving held her silent.

On the knoll before the Starling hacienda they stopped to breathe the salty coolness of the sea, and suddenly Faith pointed to the far horizon—the green starboard lights of two ships were standing in toward the lagoon. "Your cargo boats," she whispered.

He wondered why his heart was pounding—then he knew. They were symbols, those lights, symbols of a long, bitter struggle and of victory, hard-won but won at last.

Divining his thoughts, she looked up at him. "It seems like yesterday," she murmured, "you came in where those boats are now. And you grounded on the reef."

"And a girl without any clothes swam out to me."

The door of the hacienda slammed, and Dabs ran toward them. "Where you two been all day?" Breathless as always, she hurried on. "Father's in a grand stew. All morning he kept banging off dynamite up at the bat cave, and this afternoon they got in through a hole. They've been bringing things back ever since, even after it got dark. Father's all in a lather, and—"

Danny raised her in his arms. "And you're a chatterbox who ought to be in bed."

"I couldn't sleep."

"Listen, Dabs." Lifting her to his shoulder, Danny walked up the path. "There's something important I want to ask you. It's about Faith."

"What about Faith?"

"I'd like to marry her."

Dabs eyes widened. "Papa was talking about that too. He doesn't think it's a good idea."

"You surprise me. But what I really want is your permission."

She gave a quick, delighted giggle and looked at Faith. "He'll be a big help in our crazy family."

Settling the child down, Danny opened the porch door. "Come on," he said to Faith, "and hold everything. It's just possible Father will bang off some more dynamite."

Anthony's study was hardly recognizable. Piles of plaques and bas reliefs cluttered the room; skulls grinned from every chair, and three priest robes were thrown across the desk. The place smelled of the dust of centuries; the floor was muddy with the coming and going of many feet, and half-hidden behind that disarray Anthony Starling sat stooped over his desk, furiously writing in the light of a carbide lamp. Engrossed, he did not even hear them until they reached the desk, then he peered over his glasses at Faith.

"About time you're back," he snapped, and held up one of the priest robes to the lamp. "Look—look at this." His hands, shaking with excitement, caused the tiny shells to rattle. "Remember, Faith? Ten years back I said this was the way they made their priest robes? Well, here it is, just as I said. Look at those others—look at this headdress. Not another one in the world. Just these."

Greedily he fingered them, and for a moment gloated in silence, then he chuckled. "I'll make those numbbrains at the Smithsonian eat crow."

Danny leaned over the desk. "Hello, Doctor Starling."

Absently Starling looked up. "Hello, Gaylord." His eyes dropped back, and his fingers began fumbling through the litter of papers. "Where in Lucifer's name did they get to?" he muttered. "If Dabs—"

Danny tried again. "Doctor Starling. I'm the man who's going to marry your daughter."

Deep in search, Anthony did not even glance up. "Yes, yes—" Then, a triumphant bellow. "Here we are!" He snatched at a pile of pages covered with heavy scrawl, and thrust them toward Faith. "Let's type this right away —and make two carbons."

In amused exasperation she looked at Danny, then down at the pages. "But, Father, what are they?"

"What are they? You ask what they are!" The bushy eyebrows bristled, and pencils began cascading over the edge of the desk. "It's Chapter One."

"Chapter One of what?"

"Great blazing balls of fire! It's Chapter One of the book that'll shake the archaeological universe. I'll show those congenital morons—"

But once again he had caught sight of the priest robe; lovingly his fingers caressed its bright folds, and his eyes took on a look of ineffable bliss.

The great Anthony Starling was at peace with his world.

THE END

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